

## The Reckless Guns of October 2015

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Reports that U.S. and Russian warplanes [came within 10 to 20 miles of one another](#) – just a few seconds at supersonic speeds – illustrates how dangerous the military situation in Syria has become. So are [calls](#) by Al Nusra, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, for jihadis in the Caucasus to kill Russians in retribution for every Syrian death.

As the conflict continues to escalate, the danger of the fire spreading more broadly rises as well. In a few years, historians looking back on “The Guns of October 2015” might see it as something like this:

Like the Crash of 2008, the military conflict that flamed out of control in the Middle East in late 2015 was one of those events that are understandable in hindsight yet a total surprise when they actually occur. The crisis began several years earlier when Arab Spring protests in Syria provided the opening for a widespread revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalists. But when President Bashar al-Assad took measures to suppress the revolt, the United States accused him of blocking the legitimate democratic aspirations of his people and demanded that he step down.

This was to be expected since the United States had backed “regime change” in Tunisia and Egypt – and in Libya, where NATO war planes provided rebels with the edge they needed to topple long-time dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. But the problem in Syria was that while the Assad government was certainly repressive, the armed opposition was even worse. In the name of democracy, the U.S. thus found itself channeling arms and funds not only to the Muslim Brotherhood, but an array violent Sunni extremists intent on imposing a crushing dictatorship on a diverse religious population.

Increasingly fearful of a “Shi’ite crescent” stretching from Lebanon to Yemen, the arch-Sunnis of Saudi Arabia and other super-rich Arab petro-states also pitched in, flooding the rebels with “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons,” as Vice President Joe Biden [later put it](#), in an effort to promote “a proxy Sunni-Shia war” aimed at toppling Assad’s supposedly Shi’ite-dominated government.

The effect was to send sectarianism to stratospheric heights. In March 2011, the Saudis and United Arab Emirates sent troops into Bahrain to protect the Sunni royal family against widespread protests on the part of the island kingdom’s 70-percent Shi’ite majority. Four years later, the Saudis, along with eight other Sunni Arab states, declared war on Shi’ite Houthi rebels in Yemen, launching nightly air raids and later a ground invasion that, with U.S. technical backing, killed more than 2,300 civilian and rendered millions homeless.

The Arabian Peninsula was ringed with fire as Sunnis clashed with their Shi’ite rivals in a growing number of locales. The Saudis, dependent on an arch-Sunni Wahhabist religious establishment, bore prime responsibility for the debacle. But the U.S. fanned the flames by providing military support for its allies in Riyadh in an effort to rein in Iran, which Washington continued to regard as the prime enemy in the Middle East.

Amid such violence, Russian intervention, beginning on Sept. 30, 2015, had an explosive impact. The initiative drew condemnation from NATO, but widespread support from critics who had long complained that while attacking the terrorist organization known as Al Qaeda in a half-dozen or more countries, the U.S. had remained silent while aid flowed to Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, and even to ISIS, a splinter group whose penchant for violence was even more extreme.

As even the notoriously blinkered *New York Times* observed, ISIS (also known as ISIL, Islamic State, and Daesh) continued to draw support from "private donors mainly in Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia." Five years after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton complained in [a secret diplomatic memo](#) that that individual Saudis "constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide," it appeared that the kingdom was still allowing funds to flow to terrorist groups, up to and including Islamic State.

### **A Full-of-Holes Coalition**

So not only was America's anti-ISIS coalition full of holes, but its efforts to support "moderate" rebels against Islamic State was fallacious since it had long been evident that the various factions cooperated on the battlefield and shared weapons. As one expert [put it](#): "The problem is this kaleidoscopic number of opposition groups that are constantly making deals with each other. Everybody has been associated with Al Qaeda at some point."

Consequently, Russia's decision to combat all Syrian rebels – ISIS, Al Qaeda and "Free Syrian Army" alike – met with applause in many quarters though not in the power corridors of Washington. A humiliated Barack Obama had no choice but to shut down a much-derided \$500-million program to train rebels to fight ISIS, which had generated only a few dozen fighters whom Al Nusra promptly captured or killed.

President Obama might have withdrawn entirely by that point or even opted to join forces with Russia against the fundamentalists. But pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and an increasingly belligerent foreign-policy establishment at home rendered that all but impossible.

With Steve Kroft of the CBS news program "60 Minutes" taunting Obama for showing "weakness" in Syria – "He's challenging your leadership, Mr. President. He's challenging your leadership," Kroft said of Russian President Vladimir Putin – Obama soon caved. [For more information of Kroft's extraordinary intervention, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Needling Obama for More Wars.](#)"]

In short order, rebels were enjoying a bumper crop of U.S. military aid, including high-tech TOW missiles, small arms and [ammo air-dropped by American cargo planes](#). "By bombing us, Russia is bombing the thirteen 'Friends of Syria' countries," a jubilant rebel commander said, referring to the U.S. and other nations that had called for Assad's ouster in 2011. A proxy war between the United States and Russia began to take shape.

Although the White House balked at supplying the rebels with man-portable air-defense systems, pressure mounted from neoconservative politicians and pundits. A CNN op-ed that Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a leading voice on national security issues, [wrote](#) on Oct. 13, 2015, was particularly chilling. It called on Obama to inflict severe pain on Russia and Putin regardless of the consequences:

"There is an opportunity here ... to impose significant costs on an adversary that wants to undercut the United States everywhere. It is an opportunity to weaken an anti-American ruler who will always view us as an enemy. ... We cannot shy away from confronting Russia in Syria, as Putin expects the administration will do. His intervention has raised the costs and risks of greater U.S. involvement in

Syria, but it has not negated the steps we need to take. Indeed, it has made them more imperative.

“We must act now to defend civilian populations and our opposition partners in Syria. As Gen. David Petraeus and others have advocated, we must establish enclaves in Syria where civilians and the moderate opposition to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and ISIS can find greater security. These enclaves must be protected with greater American and coalition airpower and likely foreign troops on the ground. We should not rule out that U.S. forces could play a limited role in this ground contingent. If al-Assad continues to barrel bomb civilians in Syria, we should destroy his air force’s ability to operate.

“We must back up our policy in ways that check Putin’s ambitions and shape his behavior. If Russia attacks our opposition partners, we must impose greater costs on Russia’s interests — for example, by striking significant Syrian leadership or military targets. But we should not confine our response to Syria. We must increase pressure on Russia elsewhere. We should provide defensive weapons and related assistance to Ukrainian forces so they can take a greater toll on Russian forces. ... And if Putin continues to strike Syrian civilians and our opposition partners, we should ramp up targeted sanctions on Russia. Low energy prices are battering Russia’s economy and currency. We should increase that pain.”

### **Mounting Saudi-Iran Tensions**

This was the logic of ceaseless escalation. A future journalist might have observed that tensions at the same time were mounting dangerously between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Conflict between the two states dated back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which captured the imagination of Muslim militants throughout the world and threatened to expose the Saudis as corrupt and complacent supporters of the status quo.

But the more the Saudis sought to burnish their Muslim credentials by recruiting thousands of *mujahedeen* to battle Soviet “infidels” in Afghanistan and spending tens of billions of dollars to spread their ultra-conservative brand of Islam, the more the Sunni-Shi’ite rivalry intensified.

“The time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally ‘God help the Shia,’” Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan reportedly [told](#) Sir Richard Dearlove, head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6, prior to 9/11. “More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them.”

Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s long-time foreign minister, [remarked](#) to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that “Daesh is our response to your support for the Da’wa,” the Shi’ite Islamist party that the 2003 U.S. invasion helped install in Iraq.

ISIS was bad when it threatened the Saudi monarchy, but somewhat less so when it warred against Shi’ism. But 2015 marked a turning point. Once they began bombing Houthi rebels in Yemen – in Saudi eyes a cat’s paw for the Iranians – the Saudis encouraged Wahhabist clerics to denounce their enemy across the Strait of Hormuz in ever more poisonous terms. A day after the war began, for instance, the state news channel granted air time to a radical mullah named Saad bin Ateeq al-Atee to [declare](#) that Yemen was meant to be “purely for monotheism,” that it “may not be polluted neither by Houthis nor Iranians,” and that “we are cleansing the land from these rats.”

Iranian officials [responded](#) by accusing the Saudis of “follow[ing] the footsteps of Zionist Israel” and predicting that “the House of Saud will fall soon.” But the language turned even harsher after the Sept. 24 Mecca stampede, which [killed](#) at least 1,453 people, a third of them Iranians.

Amid complaints that Saudi police were [rude and indifferent](#), refusing to allow religious pilgrims, many of them elderly, to leave the area despite extreme heat, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [called](#) on Saudi Arabia to apologize to the "Muslim world" for allowing the disaster to take place, promising "a harsh and tough reaction" if the kingdom did not promptly return the bodies of those who had been killed.

Other Iranian leaders were even more incendiary. Instead of diplomacy, President Hassan Rouhani warned that Iran would use "the language of authority" in its dealings with the Saudis. Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, vowed to "make the Saudi dynasty answer for the crimes it committed," adding:

"The Muslim world is tired of the Saudis' betrayals and ignorance ... including the massacre of the people of Yemen, displacement of the poor people of Syria, repression of the people of Bahrain, ethnic massacres in Iraq, creation of ethnic tension and support of terrorism. The Saudis shall melt in the anger of the Muslims."

Mohsen Rezaei, Jafari's predecessor as head of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard, warned Riyadh: "Don't play with fire, because the fire will burn you ... don't follow the example of Saddam [Hussein], who in the middle of the Iraq-Iran War had no way out."

This was tantamount to a declaration of war. Jafari went so far as to compare the Saudis to Abu Lahab, in Islamic lore an uncle of the prophet Muhammad who fought against the Muslim cause. It was the equivalent of the pope calling the head of the Russian Orthodox church a "Judas" or even a "Satan."

### **What's the End Game?**

The direction this narrative is heading seems all too clear. One possibility is a clash between Saudi and Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz, a vital oil supply route, a revival in certain respects of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s but with F-15 fighter-bombers in the hands of the Saudis and, on the Iranian side, Shabab-3 missiles.

Admittedly, there are countervailing tendencies. With [a 20-percent budget deficit due to a precipitous decline in oil prices](#), Riyadh is under growing strain. In September 2015, a senior Saudi prince wrote [two letters](#) condemning the war in Yemen and calling for King Salman, a hardliner with close ties to the Wahhabist *ulema*, to be removed. [Rumors of a palace coup are spreading](#).

A normal state might pull in its horns as a consequence. But Saudi Arabia is one of the most bizarre political entities in history, a giant kleptocracy governed by super-rich "coupon-clippers," as do-nothing capitalists were once known.

As a result, its behavior is growing more erratic, which is why some sort of military provocation with Iran is impossible to rule out. For years, the U.S. has encouraged the gulf states to "recycle" their oil profits for the latest in high-tech weaponry. The Arabs have followed America's advice all too closely, and now the region seems set to explode.

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