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Los Angeles Times

Next test for Obama: Soothing the Saudis

Dennis Ross

March 24, 2014 -- President [Obama](#) will visit Saudi Arabia this week. Based on what I hear from key Saudis, he is in for a rough reception. Rarely have the Saudis been more skeptical about the United States, and if the president is to affect Saudi behavior, it is important for him to understand why.

Fundamentally, the Saudis believe that America's friends and interests are under threat, and the U.S. response has ranged from indifference to accommodation. The Saudis see Iran trying to encircle them with its Quds Force active in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and their own eastern province. The Saudis see an Iranian effort to shift the balance of forces in the region dramatically in Tehran's favor, whether by killing Sunni Muslims in Syria, mobilizing Shiite Muslim militias in Iraq, providing arms to the Houthi rebels in Yemen or fomenting unrest among Saudi Shiites.

Unlike the Israelis, who see the [Iranian nuclear program](#) as an existential threat, the Saudis perceive Iranian encirclement in existential terms. Like the Israelis, they are convinced Iran is determined to acquire nuclear arms but see it as an instrument in its pursuit of regional hegemony.

Fair or not, Saudi leaders believe the U.S. is seeking detente with Iran and is turning a blind eye to Tehran's troublemaking in the region. They see the Iranians using the nuclear program [negotiations](#) to buy time, and fear that the U.S. is so anxious to do a deal and avoid conflict with Iran that it refuses to compete with the Iranians in the region or to back U.S. friends as they do so. U.S. hesitancy in Syria, and particularly the perceived unwillingness to act militarily even though the president had established a "red line" on chemical weapons, has done much to feed this impression. Unfortunately, the Saudis' view of American policy toward Egypt adds to their sense of disquiet. They see the Egyptian military involved in a life-and-death struggle with the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and jihadi terrorists in the Sinai, both of whom are also perceived as a threat to Saudi Arabia. And yet they see the U.S. withholding Apache helicopters. They may not like the withholding of any weaponry from the Egyptian military, but withholding helicopters, which are effective as a counter-terror weapon, is inexplicable to the Saudis. This leads them to question whether the U.S. defines its interests in the region in a way that is compatible with Saudi Arabia's.

None of this means that the Saudis will turn away from the United States; Saudi leaders know that only the U.S. can safeguard Saudi Arabia against external threats. Nonetheless, the Saudis' disquiet can lead them to pursue policies that are destructive to U.S. interests — and theirs.

A case in point is the Saudi offer to pay for the \$2-billion to \$3-billion arms package Egypt is seeking from the Russians. At a time when [Putin](#) needs to pay a price for flouting international norms in Crimea, this is hardly the time to be offering funds for Russian arms. Even from their own perspective, how can the Saudis possibly hope to persuade Vladimir Putin about the high costs of backing Syrian President [Bashar Assad](#) if they are going to pay for the Egyptian arms request? Obama should make this point with King Abdullah.

Unfortunately, insecurity often leads to self-destructive policies, and the Saudis and Egyptians are signaling the Obama administration that they will go their own way if they can't count on us. The fact that Obama added Saudi Arabia to his itinerary indicates that he is aware of the problem. But given the depth of the Saudi doubts, the president will be unlikely to succeed if he offers only words of reassurance.

Instead, he needs to take the concerns head-on. That does not require him to accept Saudi complaints. However, he needs to show that he has no illusions about the Iranians, spelling out that we know what the Quds Force is doing and the steps the U.S. will take to counter it. For example, intercepting clandestine Iranian arms shipments would show we mean what we say.

Imagine the effect on the Saudis and others if it had been the U.S. and not Israel that intercepted the Klos-C ship this month carrying Iranian weapons destined for the Gaza Strip. Few things would more clearly demonstrate to the Saudis that we will not allow nuclear negotiations with Iran to prevent us from countering Iran's de-stabilizing actions in the region.

Egypt and Syria will be harder nuts to crack. But focusing on our common strategic objectives is a starting point: preventing Egypt from becoming a failed state, ensuring that jihadis cannot gain footholds in Egypt or Syria, and stopping the genocide in Syria. Perhaps, on Egypt — where the Saudis cannot afford to be Egypt's ATM forever — the president could offer to lift the hold on key weapons in return for the Saudis using their influence to get Egypt to finalize an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

The president will likely have difficult discussions in Riyadh. Understanding, however, that his hosts will be looking for actions and not just good words may yet make them productive.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and was a senior Middle East advisor to President Obama from 2009 to 2011.

[Article 2.](#)

The National Interest

Lebanon's Next Flashpoint

[Nicholas Saïdel](#)

March 25, 2014 -- For the approximately 18,000 Palestinians remaining in Syria's besieged Yarmouk refugee camp, life is a horrifying daily struggle, a veritable hell on earth. Earlier this month, Amnesty International released a report confirming this dystopian reality. The report reveals that 128 people have died from starvation since last July; the inevitable outcome of a military blockade imposed on the camp by Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad. The purpose of the siege is to root out foreign Sunni jihadist militias, e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra, who now occupy the camp. These militants have set up bases within the camp, and have been able to recruit new fighters from within the vulnerable Palestinian population in order to further their goal of toppling the Assad regime. Rumors of people resorting to eating grass and stray cats and dogs while trying to avoid being killed by sniper fire or Assad's crude yet lethal barrel bombs are now tragically commonplace. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the organization charged with bringing in humanitarian aid to the famished population, has been unable to consistently carry out its mission, as firefights, broken truces, and Syrian military obstructions have impeded its access to the camp. Amnesty and others are now claiming Assad is using starvation as a weapon of war, a distinctly savage strategy in a war where barbarism and brutality have become the norm. One could dismiss Yarmouk as a war crime committed by a uniquely cruel and cornered dictator, a crisis that could not be repeated elsewhere. This would be a

mistake. As the Syrian war spills over into Lebanon, we are witnessing a chain of events that could lead to a similar standoff between the Lebanese Army (LAF) and/or Hezbollah and Sunni jihadists now taking sanctuary in Palestinian refugee camps within Lebanon such as Ain el-Hilweh, the largest in the country with a population now bursting with well over one hundred thousand people. While the Cairo Agreement of 1969 - which granted the PLO security authority over the camps in Lebanon - has been nullified, the common practice within Lebanon is still to leave policing of the camps to the various Palestinian factions within the framework of security committees. De facto Palestinian sovereignty in the camps (which are governed in the form of popular committees), and self-policing by the security committees has, with exception, been a successful endeavor. Historically, Palestinian security forces have been able to locate and hand over wanted men to the LAF, and thus the LAF has routinely been able to stay out of the camps. Regrettably, this fragile tacit agreement may not survive much longer. The influx of formerly Syrian-based Palestinian refugees, some already radicalized, into Lebanese camps such as Ain el-Hilweh has coincided with the infiltration of well-armed, well-trained fighters whose goal is to bring the Syrian war to Lebanon, punishment for Hezbollah's "interference" in Syria and the LAF's perceived loyalty to Hezbollah and bias against local Sunnis who claim they are defending themselves from Shia aggression in cities such as Tripoli, Sidon and Aarsal. These jihadists, well-versed in the enticing poetics of martyrdom, have been able to exploit the impoverished conditions and bleak nature of camp life in Lebanon – perhaps the worst in the Arab world – to recruit Palestinians and sow discord within the camps. Such destabilization flies in the face of the camps' pledge to be a neutral party to the regional sectarian chaos now plaguing both Syria and Lebanon and to stay out of the internal politics of their host countries. The largely sectarian friction now emanating from the camps is boiling over into Lebanese society with terrible effect. Palestinians with connections to Ain el-Hilweh have been implicated in a number of bombings targeting Shia strongholds in the last year. Adnan Mohammed, a former resident of Ain el-Hilweh, was identified as one of the two suicide bombers who killed 25 people outside of the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon in November 2013. Nidal Hisham al-Mughayer, a Palestinian from the village of al-Bisaria (with family in Ain

el-Hilweh), was identified as a participant in the twin attacks on the Iranian Cultural Center in Beirut on February 19 that killed ten people. Naim Abbas, a Palestinian from Ain el-Hilweh and a high-ranking member of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (an al-Qaeda affiliate named after a Palestinian preacher and fighter), was captured on February 11, 2014, after being implicated in several car bombings that sent shockwaves throughout Lebanon. Abbas was known to many as the most dangerous terrorist in Lebanon. Nearly all of the radicalized Palestinians have claimed allegiance to the Azzam Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra, The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or to the extremist Lebanese Sunni Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, who along with singer-turned Sunni extremist Fadel Shaker is possibly hiding in Ain el-Hilweh since becoming a fugitive for his role in attacks on LAF checkpoints that left thirty-eight dead in June 2013. Dormant cells of Palestinian nationals in Ain el-Hilweh are allegedly preparing more attacks targeting the LAF in Sidon.

Incidents such as these, coupled with the fact that the Palestinian security forces in places like Ain el-Hilweh are mostly under-qualified, ill-equipped, and too few in number, have prompted one Fatah official in Lebanon to declare they have “lost control” of the camps. Hamas echoed this statement with its recent launch of a “harmony campaign” in the camps, replete with banners and paintings emblazoned with slogans calling for unity and warning against sedition. The stated goal of the campaign is to discourage potential suicide bombers and to foster greater cooperation with the LAF in terms of handing over criminal suspects. Hamas’ “harmony campaign” is now being complemented by what it calls an “honor initiative.” This initiative is bold and well-timed, most likely designed to shield Ain el-Hilweh from the blowback Lebanon will suffer as jihadist rebels flee into Lebanon from the Syrian town of Yabroud, which fell to Hezbollah in late March. The lofty aim of this security initiative is to bind participants across sectarian, national, and ideological lines to an honor agreement to be announced in the near future. Participants to the agreement include Islamist factions in Ain el-Hilweh, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Palestinian Authority, the Amal Movement, and apparently Hezbollah and the LAF. While the commitments of Hezbollah and the LAF remain unclear and hypothetical, the Palestinian factions are reportedly pledging not to host any fugitives or launch or be involved in any security

incident whether inside or outside the camps. This memorandum-of-understanding will place the security burden onto the Palestinian factions, giving them legal and political cover to act against “takfiri” groups operating in the camp. Such a security structure will surely be put to test in the near future. While the Lebanese state seems willing to comply at the moment, should there be catastrophic violence traced back to Ain el-Hilweh, this agreement will likely have minimal impact on the Lebanese response. Despite Hamas’ efforts and the pleas of Fatah, violence and fear are on the rise in the camps. Assassinations are becoming more frequent. Most recently, on March 10, high-ranking Fatah official Brig. General Jamil Zeidan was gunned down in Ain el-Hilweh in a possible reprisal attack from pro-Syrian Palestinian sympathizers, Shia gunmen affiliated with Hezbollah, or Sunni extremists attempting to silence moderates who would turn them over to the Lebanese government. This is the second time a Fatah official was killed in Ain el-Hilweh this year. On February 2, Wisam Abul Kel, a member of Fatah, was shot and killed by masked men outside the grocery store in the camp. In addition, at least one Palestinian faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), has broken ranks with its countrymen to support Assad and Hezbollah. The PFLP-GC is actually helping the Assad regime in its siege of Yarmouk. Such violence and disunity within the Palestinian factions—even inside Fatah—coupled with the imminent fallout from the loss of Yabroud, strengthens the argument that the atmosphere in the camps will be one of increasing chaos, one which will eventually necessitate external intervention. Hezbollah, the self-proclaimed champion of Palestinian rights, is also taking notice of the camps’ destabilization and division. Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah recently gave a speech on current events in the region, a speech that, at first blush, curiously focused on the primacy of resistance against Israel as opposed to the bombings in Lebanon and the war in Syria. Within the present context, however, Nasrallah’s overtures to the Palestinians cause make sense in that Hezbollah fears losing the Palestinian camps’ support within Lebanon. Such support is based on a historical relationship that goes back to the Lebanese Civil War—specifically to the War of the Camps, in which Hezbollah supported the Palestinian camps that were then under siege by the Amal Movement. Hezbollah cannot afford further destabilization

within Lebanon while it pursues its interests in Syria. Palestinian suicide bombers attacking Hezbollah or Iranian targets, acts that would inevitably kill innocent Lebanese, play right into the hands of Hezbollah's domestic opponents who would prefer the group disarm in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions. Against this disturbing backdrop, the question must be asked: If there were a complete breakdown of order and the Palestinian factions lost control of Ain el-Hilweh as they did in Yarmouk, how would the LAF and Hezbollah respond? This question is not merely theoretical. The historical animosity of many Lebanese toward the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon – seen by some as an alien population that saps resources and presents unnecessary security risks to the country – could foment a popular movement to take the camps through force of arms if things were to spiral out of control. Amal's siege of Palestinian refugee camps during the War of the Camps demonstrates a historical precedent in this regard. The 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which a Lebanese Christian militia conducted the wholesale slaughter of innocent Palestinians in the Sabra neighborhood and adjacent Shatila Palestinian refugee camp, is also illuminating in that it illustrates the tenuous nature of life as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon and the willingness of the Lebanese to turn their arms against this exposed populace. Perhaps most revealing is the precedent established by the 2007 conflict between the LAF and Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp. Fatah al-Islam is a Sunni Islamist group with ideological ties to al-Qaeda. After an arrest of one of their members in Tripoli, Fatah al-Islam militants carried out deadly reprisal attacks against the LAF and then retreated into the Nahr al-Bared camp. What followed was an intense 105 day siege of the camp and a ground and air campaign waged by the LAF to oust the militants from their positions within Nahr al-Bared. After months of heavy fighting, Lebanon declared victory. Forty-seven Palestinian civilians were killed in the conflict. Interestingly, while the LAF had no issue with entering the camp in violation of the "defunct" Cairo Agreement, Hezbollah all the while called for a political solution. Hassan Nasrallah did not mince words when he stated: "The Nahr el-Bared camp and Palestinian civilians are a red line. We will not accept or provide cover or be partners in this." Hezbollah's restraint during the Nahr al-Bared conflict, in combination with its pro-Palestinian position during the War of the Camps

and its current status as the “resistance” against Israel – a pro-Palestinian role that provides the organization with legitimacy as an armed militia within Lebanon – supports the view that it would not directly involve itself in a military incursion into the camps. Moreover, Hezbollah is losing popularity in an increasingly destabilized Lebanon, and is stretched thin as it takes heavy losses in Syria while simultaneously being pounded by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Finally, Hezbollah’s role as a mediator between Syria and the Palestinian factions at Yarmouk shows that it has no desire to be seen as a party to the siege, but rather as the party that brought about reconciliation and an end to the siege. Hezbollah’s logic in Yarmouk would be just as, if not more, successful were the LAF to enter the camps with its weapons drawn. While Hezbollah has a vital interest in stemming the tide of Sunni jihadists flowing into Lebanon, it is likely Hezbollah would prefer the role of arbiter and symbol of rapprochement in a scenario in which the camps were overrun.

Having said that, Hezbollah’s relationship with influential Palestinian factions such as Hamas is at an all-time low considering their antithetical views on the fate of Syria. In fact, Hezbollah’s heavy casualties in the Battle of Qusayr in May 2013 may have been due to Hamas’ logistical and operational support of the Syrian rebels during that bloody skirmish. The tension between Hezbollah and the Palestinian refugees of Ain el-Hilweh in particular is exemplified by the burning of humanitarian aid provided by Hezbollah to the camp’s residents in May 2013. Notwithstanding this tension and Hezbollah’s rift with Hamas over the former’s existential fight in Syria, it seems unlikely that Hezbollah would take part in any military action that would put innocent Palestinian lives at risk within the camps of Lebanon. By contrast, the 2007 siege of Nahr al-Bared shows the LAF’s willingness to confront Palestinian camps within Lebanon should they be overrun by extremists presenting a threat to Lebanese national security. Its military capacity now bolstered by billions of dollars in external funding from Europe and Saudi Arabia, the LAF will be better equipped in the near future to tackle a crisis in the camps without resorting to antiquated siege tactics that would invariably harm the civilian Palestinian population, tactics like those now being used by the depleted Syrian army in Yarmouk. Should a true crisis emerge in the camps, or a mass-casualty event be traced back to a camp such as Ain el-Hilweh, no last-minute patchwork

memorandum-of-understanding between the Palestinian factions, the Shi'a organizations, and least of all the LAF, will preserve Palestinian sovereignty in the camps. Hezbollah will likely only play a background role in terms of its involvement in the official Lebanese response. In such a scenario, it will be up to the LAF to assert itself as the singular army of Lebanon, a modern and moral military capable of achieving its objectives in accordance with internationally accepted principles regarding the laws of war. In a conflict in which one side purposely hides, recruits, and operates in densely populated refugee camps where resources are scarce, the LAF's task will be no less than herculean. Just this past weekend, as aid resumed in besieged Yarmouk, up to nine people were killed when an aid distribution center was hit by Syrian artillery, a dismal reminder that if and when the LAF does act, it must do so in coordination with international humanitarian aid groups such as the International Red Cross and UNRWA. Let us hope for the innocents of Ain el-Hilweh that the LAF is up to the challenge.

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[Article 3.](#)

American Prospect

Disrespecting Your Defender

Gershon Gorenberg

March 24, 2014 -- Moshe Ya'alon thinks that President Barack Obama is a wimp and that Secretary of State John Kerry is mentally incompetent. If Ya'alon were a GOP senator, this wouldn't be worthy of comment. He'd be doing what has come to be the job of Republican politicians: to blame every international crisis on Obama's alleged lack of machismo and to presume that action-hero growls will attract votes this November and two years hence. The job requirements do not include providing realistic policy alternatives.

Ya'alon, however, is not one of Obama's domestic political opponents. Rather, he is Israel's defense minister, responsible for the security of a client state that is heavily dependent on a superpower, of which Obama happens to be president. So it registered several points higher on the Richter Scale of rudeness and irresponsibility when Ya'alon [gave a talk](#) last week at Tel Aviv University describing the decline and impending fall of America. In Ukraine, and pretty much everywhere around the globe, he declared, "the United States is demonstrating weakness." Ya'alon suggested that the interim agreement and negotiations with Iran were a means for Obama to "put off confrontation" with Teheran over nuclear arms and leave the problem for "the next president." By creating an "image of feebleness," he said, America invited new terror attacks on its own soil and, ultimately, defeat in a "war of civilizations." Is this the same America that gives Israel billions of dollars in military aid, that provides Israel with sophisticated arms, that defends it in international forums? Ya'alon was underwhelmed by such considerations. American aid, he said, should be "seen in proportion," since helping Israel is in America's own interest, and since Israel has developed the Iron Dome and Arrow anti-missile defenses, which presumably add to American security. Ya'alon, it seemed, had bought one of the t-shirts sold in Jerusalem souvenir shops to tourists that says, "Don't worry America—Israel is behind you," and missed the irony. But then, the entire talk raised questions about the defense minister's ability to grasp Israel's international situation. Most obviously, Ya'alon managed to strain relations with the United States for the second time this year—or, to use the term favored by U.S. politicians trying to prove their pro-Israel creds, he opened up a large amount of daylight between the Israeli government and the administration. Beside that, Israel's defense minister (whoever holds the post) handles ongoing military cooperation with America. The likelihood that Ya'alon will be invited soon to visit the Pentagon or State Department to discuss arms, intelligence-sharing, joint exercises or regional strategy has just dropped. I can only feel pity for the director-general of his ministry or the army chief of staff who travels in place of Ya'alon and has to explain his boss to icy hosts. The military relationship will continue; it won't work as smoothly. Just a little less obviously, Ya'alon has himself promoted the misperception that the United States is "feeble." To explain how foolish this, I ask you to

think back to the standard middle-school friendship between a skinny kid and a muscular one who protects him from the hallway bullies. If the skinny kid starts telling everyone that the big guy is really afraid of fights, who's likely to get hurt first? True, Israel isn't exactly a weakling, but a large piece of its deterrent is the regional understanding that it has a superpower's support. Damage the image, and you damage the deterrent. This is the second round of Ya'alon's peculiar charm offensive. In January, the mass-circulation daily Yediot Aharonot published leaks from conversations in which the defense minister attacked Kerry's efforts to negotiate a two-state agreement in general, and in particular his proposal for security arrangements between Israel and the Palestinian state-to-be. The defense minister described Kerry's diplomacy as driven by "an incomprehensible obsession and messianic delusion." The only thing that could save Israel was for Kerry "to win the Nobel Prize and leave us in quiet," Ya'alon said. ("Quiet," it seems, is how Ya'alon foresees the consequences of permanent Israeli rule over the West Bank.) Ya'alon didn't deny the comments. It took him a day, and a press statement from State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki labeling his words "offensive and inappropriate," before he issued a brief apology. This time around, Ya'alon has been even slower to retreat. His verbal offensive was reported last Tuesday in the daily Ha'aretz. By the next day, Kerry had called Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to complain, and a "senior official" in Washington had told the Israeli media that Ya'alon was "undermining" the U.S.-Israel relationship. At the State Department press briefing, Psaki began remarking daily about Ya'alon's "pattern" of statements that "don't reflect the true nature of our relationship with Israel." As of Friday, according to Psaki, the administration was still waiting for Ya'alon to apologize; as of Monday morning Israel time, the defense minister hadn't done so. Translated from diplomatese, State was saying that Israel's top defense official was an ungrateful lout and serial offender, and Ya'alon appeared entirely unmoved. What's driving Ya'alon? Clearly, he believes that force is the only answer to crises. The U.S. decision to negotiate with Iran rather than bomb it, and the choice not to answer Russia's Crimean gambit militarily—never mind the risk of nuclear war—don't make sense to him. Ya'alon is an ex-general, but not all ex-generals think this way. Some learn from years in uniform that armies can't solve all problems.

Ya'alon never learned to think outside the box of the war room. Besides that, Ya'alon wants to succeed Netanyahu as leader of the Likud Party and as prime minister. To appeal to the party's base, he is playing on two classic themes of the Israeli right: First, Jewish pride demands that political independence be absolute, protected entirely by Jewish strength; second, that the Jews as a small people deserve the backing of the Western superpower of the day. The two beliefs don't fit together. But you can understand people best through their contradictions, and the right wing of Zionism has assiduously cultivated this contradiction since pre-state days. Put together, they produce grandiloquent statements and a constant sense of being betrayed by the reigning superpower. This is the script that Benjamin Netanyahu has followed. Here we come to the crux: Netanyahu has done very little to challenge the assumption that Ya'alon is saying out loud what he'd like to say himself—indeed, what he has said at times. Knowing that America's image is important to Israel's deterrence, it would have been smart for Netanyahu to celebrate Syria's agreement last year to give up chemical arms and Iran's willingness to negotiate as evidence that the mere possibility of an American attack makes nations shake. Instead, Netanyahu treated both breakthroughs as signs of American weakness. No Israeli politician has more consistently behaved as a participant in American politics, trying to stir public opinion against Democratic presidents and ignoring the potential price. If Netanyahu hasn't done more to put Ya'alon in line, it's no wonder. The defense minister is speaking—gruffly, with a smaller vocabulary—in his master's voice.

Gershom Gorenberg is a senior correspondent for The Prospect. He is the author of The Unmaking of Israel, of The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977 and of The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount.

[Article 4.](#)

Al-Monitor

Iran resumes monetary aid to Hamas

Adnan Abu Amer

March 24, 2014 -- Al-Monitor has learned from Gaza sources that Iranian financial support has resumed to Hamas, but at a level lower than that which preceded the rupture between the two at the end of 2012.

Gaza political circles have been wondering whether Hamas would return to the Iran axis after a break that lasted more than two years. On March 10, leading [Hamas figure Mahmoud al-Zahar](#), the last link between Hamas and Iran, announced steps to restore the bilateral relationship.

Al-Monitor has learned from a source close to Hamas' political leadership that Iran is also planning to receive Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal soon, after a long tug of war marked by undisclosed shuttle discussions. The source said that Qatar was mediating with Iran to restore ties with Hamas. In late February, [Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah](#) visited Tehran for that purpose.

The source added that last week, Iran gave the green light for Meshaal's visit after contacts between Zahar and Marwan Issa, a senior leader in the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas' armed wing. This long overdue visit will culminate in Meshaal meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In his meeting with Meshaal and in his recent and first visit to Qatar, Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ramadan Shalah discussed the details of the [upcoming visit to Tehran](#).

Regional developments

The resumption of relations between the two sides was announced March 10 by head of the Iranian Shura Council Ali Larijani, who said, "[Iran is supporting Hamas](#) on the grounds that it is a resistance movement. ... Our relationship with [Hamas] is good and has returned to what it was. We have no problems with [Hamas]."

Al-Monitor surveyed a number of Hamas leaders of first and second rank at home and abroad about how they feel about a renewed relationship with Iran. In a meeting at his Gaza office, one Hamas leader told Al-Monitor, "The movement is not jumping from one lap to another, from Iran, then Egypt, then Qatar and finally back to Iran. [Hamas] has not necessarily erred. Rather, [Hamas] is in harmony with itself and with its Islamic and national liberation line. [Hamas] has sided with the will of the people, their right to freedom and [their right] to form their political system."

The source conceded that the turn in regional events following former President Mohammed Morsi's ouster in Egypt has hastened the progress of Iran-Hamas ties. Improvement in ties between Qatar, which is home to Meshaal, and Iran is also a key factor in Hamas' own warming of ties with Tehran.

"Of course, the developments in the region have accelerated the return of relations between Hamas and Iran," the source added. "Perhaps the most important [of those developments] is Hamas' harsh break with Egypt after the coup and the tension between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The [tension] has helped warm the relationship between Doha and Tehran, and that has cast a shadow over Hamas in a positive way."

[Youssef Rizqa](#), the former information minister in the Hamas government, described the relationship with Iran as stable and said that the two sides agree on many issues, most notably the conflict with Israel.

Hamas was pleased with the resumption of financial support, as it signaled that there is no veto on the movement by decision-making circles in Tehran. Furthermore, Hamas is optimistic that Meshaal's visit will result in increasing Iran's financial support.

The latter was confirmed by Ahmed Youssef, a former political adviser to Palestinian leader Ismail Haniyeh, who said that [Hamas is keen to develop its relationship with Iran](#) because the two are strategic partners and have agreed to show understanding for their respective positions on contentious issues, especially the situation in Syria.

However, the return of Hamas-Iran relations will not necessarily be lauded all of Tehran's allies, notably Syria and Hezbollah, who do not agree about [accepting Hamas back](#) into their axis.

Reconciling with Hezbollah

A senior Palestinian figure in Lebanon sought to mediate reconciliation between Hamas and Hezbollah in conjunction with that between Hamas and Iran. In a telephone interview with Al-Monitor, he confirmed that Hezbollah claims that Hamas elements are turning a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons to Syria through Lebanon and that some Hamas elements have been discovered fighting in Syria. He also noted that some Palestinians have been involved in the bombings in the southern suburbs of Beirut, although this is denied by Hamas. "The closed-door mediation efforts between Hamas and Hezbollah in Beirut has culminated in them

‘agreeing to disagree’ regarding Syria and in continuing the ‘strategic partnership,’” he noted. This same idea was expressed by Hamas figure Salah Bardawil, who said that Hamas’ relationship with Hezbollah is good [despite the differences over Syria](#). He also noted that efforts are being made to restore relations as beneficial to both parties. Hamas is not limiting itself to talk of improving its relationship with Hezbollah, but has begun to send delegations to Lebanese parties to [absolve Hamas](#) of accusations that it is the main incubator of jihadist and Salafist groups in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon; this has prompted Hamas representatives to act to prove their innocence to Hezbollah. The links between the two sides are still there and neither side is thinking of cutting them, despite the complexities and differences, especially since their common ground is substantial. Jihad Taha, a Hamas figure in Lebanon, said in a March 16 interview with Sadaaden.com that his movement is considering launching an initiative to [strengthen Lebanese-Palestinian relations](#) and prevent sectarian strife, indicating that Hamas wishes to improve its relationship with Hezbollah through a series of intensive meetings and visits with Lebanese security authorities to ensure its success. A source close to Hamas told Al-Monitor that the return of Hamas’ relations with Tehran can be seen as part of the “card reshuffling” in the region in the last few months as a result of the changes in Egypt and Syria.

“The return of the relationship between them is now at hand, because the decision-makers in Shiite Tehran, in light of the sectarian and political polarization dominating the region, want to restore the relationship with Sunni Hamas and strengthen ties with it. Hamas, in turn, needs such a relationship at this critical stage and hopes that Meshaal’s visit will accomplish that. This will pump new support in Hamas’ arteries and help it withstand the siege, which is worsening in an unprecedented way.”

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The Washington Post

Why the study of Vladimir Putin is so important

[Richard Cohen](#)

March 24, 2014 -- *“Sophie, Sophie, don't die! Stay alive for the children,” the dying Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand urged his wife as she slumped over him in the open-topped sports car. But Gavrilo Princip's shot had already killed her. A bodyguard asked Franz Ferdinand if he was in pain. ‘It's nothing!’ he replied repeatedly. Those were his last words.”*

This is the way Simon Kuper began his [Financial Times piece on what happened in Sarajevo](#) 100 years ago on June 28, the beginning of World War I. The article is about many things, the city of Sarajevo, the doomed archduke and his morganatic bride, Sophie — virtually shunned at court on account of her low rank — but most of all Princip, the Serb nationalist, who started the conflagration with a mere pistol. There were many causes of that war — an entire bookshelf's worth in my office alone — but the fact remains that if Princip had hesitated, if he had missed, if he had not wandered to seek a sandwich at Moritz Schiller's delicatessen when Franz Ferdinand's driver had taken the wrong turn, the Great War might not have happened.

And neither would have the swift collapse of four empires, the arbitrary creation of the modern Middle East, Germany's hyperinflation, the rise of fascism, Hitler and, of course, World War II, the Holocaust, Soviet expansionism, the Cold War and so much more. The very first domino was toppled by a single man, a tubercular who was to die before the war he started had ended. The lone assassin had changed history.

He had struck before and many times since. He killed Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield and William McKinley, John F. Kennedy and his younger brother Robert, Yitzhak Rabin (and the chance for an Arab- Israeli peace), Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi. One man, one weapon, and history pivoted.

This is why the study of Vladimir Putin is so important. Russian nationalism is an indigenous force, and Russian grievance is somewhat the same. But another leader may not have fanned either one. A non-Putin, in fact, may not have felt either emotion so intensely. Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president and now the prime minister, probably [would not have seized Crimea](#). Nothing about him suggests otherwise. He is no Putin. But Putin is. The tautology has become plain. The reformer has become the uber nationalist and expansionist. He has an edge to him, a menace. He plays a losing hand, but he plays it well because while he is weak, his opponents are weaker. They vacillate. They dillydally. They fear confrontation. In fact, they abhor it. [Putin knows what he wants](#). He will take what the West allows.

We hear now from [observers of Putin](#), people who knew him over the years. We search for clues to his character, his tics, his weaknesses. The accounts are not encouraging. We learn he can lie. We learn he can be inscrutable. We find nothing about heavy drinking, rampant womanizing — excesses, addictions, vile bigotries. He is a good student. Strobe Talbott, a deputy secretary of state in the Clinton administration, wrote in [The Post about meeting Putin in Moscow](#): “For no reason other than to show he had read my KGB dossier, he dropped the names of two Russian poets I had studied in college.” Impressive. I have heard similar stories about Putin. George Smiley is in the Kremlin now.

In 1943, the philosopher Sidney Hook published “[The Hero in History](#).” Hook was a former communist moving at warp speed toward what we now would call neoconservatism. His book was a riposte to determinism; Nikita Khrushchev embodied it in 1956 when he told Western ambassadors in Moscow, “Whether you like it or not, history is on our side.” (The American version of this is “the wrong side of history” formulation — as if history has a purpose or a conscience.) Hook knew better. Men are not merely swept away by movements, they create movements. Heroes matter. Great men matter. So do evil ones.

The 20th century settled the question of whether one man can alter history. Of course he can. Hitler did. Stalin did. Churchill put steel in Britain’s backbone, and Roosevelt saved the snarling American free-enterprise system by house-breaking it. Gavrilo Princip had his moment too. On a day

almost 100 years ago, he got off two shots, swiftly killing two people and, before the century had ended, probably 100 million more.

[Article 6](#)

BBC

The deep discord bedevilling the Arab world

Gerald Butt

March 25, 2014 -- Indeed, expectations are, if anything, even lower than in the past. This latest heads-of-state meeting, like all previous ones, is being convened by the Arab League, which was established nearly 70 years ago to foster mutual co-ordination in order to achieve "the close co-operation of the member-states". In the euphoria of that post-colonial independence era much more than co-operation seemed possible. Millions of Arabs dreamed of smashing down the border fences erected by the British and French colonists to achieve unity from Morocco in the west to the Gulf states in the east.

Once again, reality has fallen woefully below even the most modest expectations". All the ingredients seemed to be there as energetic young leaders took power: shared religion, language, history and culture - and a craving for a return of Arab self-esteem.

But surely today it can be no more than a handful of starry-eyed idealists who still cling to the dream of Arab unity. Half a century or more of inter-government jealousy, rivalry and war have long buried that dream in the minds of most Arabs. The start of the popular uprisings in 2011 - the Arab spring - raised expectations again, not of Arab unity, but of something that would still come close to meeting popular aspirations. The overpowering urge to remove dictators from power was driven to a large extent by that same desire for dignity and self-esteem. The new regimes, it was recognised, would not break down the colonial borders, it was too late for that. But the hope was that they would at least work together in the common cause of facing shared regional challenges: Israel, the plight of Palestinians, inequality in wealth distribution, youth unemployment, failing education systems, paltry intra-Arab investment, and so on.

Once again, reality has fallen woefully below even the most modest expectations. In four decades of covering the Middle East I cannot remember the Arab world being as multilaterally fractured as it is today. Arabs are trapped under a dense and complex cat's cradle of ideological and sectarian differences. Even in the one corner of the Middle East where there is a regional body, the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC - comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), there are fresh challenges.

Formed in 1981 as Britain withdrew from the Gulf, the GCC has failed to achieve its most ambitious targets of economic integration and the establishment of a credible joint defence capability. But today it faces unprecedented discord:

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have withdrawn ambassadors from Qatar because of the latter's support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt and elsewhere.

Kuwait and Oman have remained neutral in this dispute, so there are now three clearly different camps within the GCC on regional policy and support for the MB.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain accuse Iran of meddling in their internal affairs by stoking unrest within their Shia communities, while Oman has recently hosted the Iranian foreign minister on an official visit. Oman also angered other GCC states by brokering secret talks between Iran and the United States on the nuclear issue.

Further afield, the list continues:

Iraq has accused Saudi Arabia and Qatar of seeking to destabilise the country.

Relations between Egypt and Qatar are strained over the MB issue.

Saudi Arabia has designated the MB a terrorist group.

Egypt has designated Hamas a terrorist group and is keeping Gaza isolated.

Syria, embroiled in a civil war with outside backing, has accused Saudi Arabia and Qatar of seeking to undermine the country.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are supporting different factions of the Syrian opposition. The Arab Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan accuse Iraq of acting as an agent of Shia Iran and allowing Iranian arms to reach Syria - and of marginalising the Iraqi Sunni community.

Lebanon is divided between those for and against the Syrian government, and for and against Hezbollah's military support for Damascus. Against this background it will be surprising if many Arab heads of state feel enthusiastic about attending the next summit in Kuwait (Syria is already suspended from the Arab League). An agenda that took into account even a fraction of the above grievances is unimaginable. Unity has been off the table for many years. Today, meaningful intra-regional co-operation, too, is looking like a distant prospect.

This leaves individual Arab states to cope alone as best they can with the range of challenges facing the Middle East - that is when the regimes are not preoccupied with fighting for their interests in the maelstrom of regional disputes.

Gerald Butt, a former BBC Middle East correspondent, covers the Middle East for the Church Times.

[Article 7.](#)

Asharq Al Awsat

Diverting the Blue Nile's course could take Africa to war

Huda Al Hussein

24 Mar, 2014 -- Water wars, many warn, could be around the corner. After the removal of former President Mohamed Mursi, Egypt has inherited a huge problem: Addis Ababa decided to divert the course of the Blue Nile late May, as part of its project to generate electricity through the construction of the Renaissance Dam. Ethiopia took the decision—which will have a negative impact on Egypt's share of the water from the Nile—one day after Mursi returned to Cairo from a state visit to Addis Ababa, a move the Egyptians considered as a blow to the Islamist president.

Ethiopians seem to have sensed Egypt's weak position.

There are ten countries along the Nile. The problem here is that Ethiopia's unilateral step means the collapse of the current regional order set by Great Britain and Egypt in 1929 in what is known as the Nile Water Agreement.

Apart from Ethiopia, none of the Nile Basin countries was independent when the agreement was signed. The agreement allocated 48 million cubic meters of water per year to Egypt and 4 million to Sudan—but it neglected the other eight countries. In 1959, Egypt and Sudan agreed to increase their share of the Nile water to 55 million and 18 million cubic meters, respectively, allowing Egypt to build the Aswan Dam. The agreement bans the establishment of any project on the Nile, its tributaries or the Nile Basin that may reduce the amount of water reaching Egypt. The agreement also gives Egypt the right to conduct inspections and investigations along the Nile down to its farthest sources.

This right, which is equivalent to an Egyptian veto against any water and energy projects, has been a subject of intense debate, and has caused restlessness among Nile Basin countries. These countries—once colonies—consider Egypt's privileges as a violation of their sovereignty, and some have already begun running water projects threatening Egypt's share. Egypt considers any change to the agreement as tantamount to a strategic threat and has repeatedly threatened to use all means available to prevent a violation of the agreement.

After the overthrow of Mursi, several meetings between water ministers from the member states of the technical committee have failed. So have the February 11 talks in Addis Ababa between the Ethiopian and Egyptian water ministers.

Egypt is trying to dissuade or persuade Ethiopia from changing its plans in a bid to limit the damages to its interests. But Ethiopia insists on adhering to its original plan, claiming the dam will have no negative impact on Egypt. As for Sudan, it has taken Ethiopia's side and is supportive of the dam's construction.

Turkey, whose relationship with Egypt has worsened after Mursi's removal, has been encouraging Addis Ababa to go ahead with the construction of the dam, Egyptian media reported. Several media outlets in Egypt have not ruled out Israel's potential role in the project.

Last January Egypt pulled out of talks with Ethiopia and Sudan, announcing that it will resort to all diplomatic and political means in order to preserve or even increase its share of Nile water. Ethiopia said it will go ahead with building the dam even after the suspension of the talks. Around 30 percent of the dam has now been constructed, but will take another

three years to complete. However, Egypt's Minister of Water Resources Mohamed Abdel-Motaleb said Egypt will not stand with its hands tied and that it is supportive of the construction of the dam providing it does not impact Egypt's water security. The Egyptian minister also called on Ethiopia to freeze the construction process pending necessary technical research to ensure neither Egypt nor Sudan will be affected in case the dam collapses.

After his visit to Moscow, Egypt's Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi said the problem could be solved and that the Nile could fulfil each of the countries' water needs. Fahmi, however, warned that if no agreement was reached as soon as possible, Egypt would not accept to give up its water security, urging everyone to be prepared to deal with the consequences of an undesirable regional crisis.

Ethiopia responded on February 17 that the military establishment is poised to protect the Renaissance Dam, highlighting that it is a national project, one the Ethiopians deem as one of the country's greatest achievements. Ten days later, Ethiopia and Sudan signed, in the presence of both countries' ministers of defense, a protocol to form a joint force tasked with the protection of their borders.

Egypt adheres to the agreement and considers it to be effective according to international law, maintaining that any amendment or change requires its prior approval. In comments about the issue, Sherif Mousa, the director of the Middle East program at the American University in Cairo, said the agreement should be dealt with in the same way the borders of most of the Nile Basin countries are respected which have been drawn by the colonial powers and recognized by international law.

What Ethiopia has done seems like an extension of the Arab Spring. And Crimea's independence from Ukraine confirms that no international order recognized by international law will remain the same. Should Ethiopia be allowed to do what it likes, all of the Nile Basin countries will follow suit. The problem is that all African countries occupy higher land elevations than Egypt. The 1959 bilateral agreement between Egypt and Sudan that saw an increase in the two countries' shares—neglecting other countries' interests, such as those of Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia—has weakened Egypt's contention that the 1929 agreement cannot be violated. Ethiopia was the first to challenge the agreement, claiming the full right to the Blue

Nile and the diversion of its course—a move Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda were supportive of. This breakaway led to the signing of the 2010 Entebbe Agreement by the upstream countries in East Africa including Ethiopia. The agreement allows for the signatories to carry out water projects on the Nile without the approval of Egypt. South Sudan said it will join the agreement while Congo and Eritrea remained on the sidelines. But the agreement was opposed by both Egypt and Sudan, which, following the overthrow of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, sided with Ethiopia.

With its increasing population and poverty-stricken rural areas, Ethiopia has decided, in accordance with the Entebbe Agreement, to build the Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. At a cost of 4.7 billion US dollars, the dam will be the largest in Africa. With its 74 million cubic meter reservoir, it is expected to generate 6,000 megawatts of energy. To facilitate its construction, Ethiopia has diverted the Blue Nile 500 meters from its natural course.

The Egyptian media has launched a campaign against Ethiopia, claiming that the Egyptian people would rather die defending their right to the water than die of thirst. Of course, Egypt will not allow Ethiopia to ignore Egypt's right to its share of Nile water. Moreover, according to international laws, Ethiopia cannot obtain the Blue Nile water. This is not to mention that the Egyptian army is powerful and can comply with the country's agreements. The two countries can reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Perhaps, Ethiopia would provide Egypt with water in exchange for security. Should it benefit from some of the energy generated by the Renaissance dam, Egypt can carry out sea water desalination projects that require both energy and money.

Ethiopia's unilateral decision to build the Renaissance Dam has shaken all of Africa, not just Egypt. Should a war take place, the dam will not protect Ethiopia. Egypt needs to organize its house at a time when most world countries are experiencing instability.

[Article 8.](#)

NYT

Egypt's Miscarriage of Justice

Editorial

March 24, 2014 -- Egypt has been on an alarming downward spiral ever since the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Even so, [the court verdict](#) on Monday that condemned 529 Islamists to death for the killing of a single police officer last summer was a uniquely shocking example of a judicial system run amok.

The verdict could well be overturned on appeal. Nevertheless, it represents an outrageous escalation of the military-led government's ruthless crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist supporters of its ally, Mohamed Morsi. It will further radicalize the group's members. And it will almost surely worsen instability in one of the Arab world's most important countries.

There is no way that the proceeding can be seen as anything other than a show trial with a preordained political outcome. It was clearly intended to intimidate anyone who dares to challenge the military or shows sympathy for the Brotherhood and Mr. Morsi, who was elected president in 2012 in a democratic election and then ousted in a military coup last summer.

According to legal experts, the verdict was the largest mass sentencing in modern Egyptian history. It followed a trial that lasted little more than two days — not enough time to make a case against even a single person, much less 529 people, charged with murder for the killing of a police officer in rioting that followed Mr. Morsi's ouster.

On the face of it, convicting so many people in one death is preposterous. The fact that 16 of those charged were acquitted does not legitimize the process in the least. Only 123 defendants were in the courtroom; the rest were either released, out on bail or on the run.

It is impossible to know whether the court in the city of Minya where the verdicts were handed down was caught up in the animosity against Mr. Morsi and his supporters that has swept Egypt since his overthrow or whether the court was acting on directions from security officials. Either way, the case lays bare a prejudicial system that has been quick to punish Mr. Morsi's supporters while ignoring gross human rights violations by the military-led government that replaced him.

Among these violations were the shooting of more than 1,000 Egyptians who protested the coup, and the subsequent arrest of thousands more.

These incidents, in turn, triggered a backlash by Morsi supporters against

police around the country. The backlash included violent protests in Minya last year, including the killing of the police officer that led to the trial. Governments, of course, have a duty to protect their citizens and bring criminals to justice. But this trial had all the makings of a vendetta, not a fair and rigorous judgment. Even if the verdict is overturned on appeal, as lawyers predict, the process is illegitimate and perpetuates the government's transparent effort to crush the Brotherhood. Mr. Morsi's mistakes, authoritarian ways and efforts to monopolize power now seem almost modest compared with the official brutality of his successors. The verdict should also raise alarms about the fate of other prisoners, including several journalists for the pan-Arab news channel Al Jazeera, whose trial is underway in Cairo, as well as 600 other defendants, whose mass trial is set to begin on Tuesday. The possibility that all could be faced with death sentences, a barbaric and indefensible punishment, is chilling. Inexplicably, the [United States](#) and Britain issued separate, similarly weak statements, which said that they were "deeply concerned" about the death sentences. That's unlikely to have much effect on Egypt's military and a population that largely seems willing to tolerate its abuses.