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Article 1.	The Economist <u>A Muslim Brother is better than a Mubarak crony</u>
Article 2.	NYT <u>At 50, the Cuban Missile Crisis as Guide</u> Graham Allison
Article 3.	NYT <u>Pinched and Griping in Iran</u> Nicholas D. Kristof
Article 4.	The Daily Beast <u>Meet Prince Salman, the Next Saudi King</u> Bruce Riedel
Article 5.	Wall Street Journal <u>Saudi Crown Prince Nayef Dead</u> Ellen Knickmeyer
Article 6.	Al-Hayat <u>Jordan: Nagging Is A Second Nature For The Tribesmen</u> Jihad el-Khazen
Article 7.	The Weekly Standard <u>Seeing Syria Clearly</u> Lee Smith

Article 1.

The Economist

A Muslim Brother is better than a Mubarak crony

Jun 16th 2012 -- THE likely choice of candidates in the run-off on June 16th and 17th to decide who will be Egypt's next president is not what The Economist had hoped for. That is hardly surprising, since we incline

towards liberalism, and the Arab spring has not fostered it in the Arab world's biggest country.

Amr Moussa, the diplomat we supported in the first round, was trounced, and Egyptians now have a wretched choice between Muhammad Morsi, a dreary Muslim Brother who narrowly won the first round, and Ahmed Shafiq, a former air-force chief and standard-bearer for the Mubarak old guard.

Even now the contest is plagued by uncertainty. As we went to press, the supreme court was due to rule on whether to exclude Mr Shafiq from the run-off because of his role in the old regime. Such a chaotic debut for democracy would tempt ordinary Egyptians to pine for the brutal certitudes of Mr Mubarak's rule. Better that the vote take place—and that Mr Morsi, the Muslim Brother, become president of the Arab world's biggest country. People are nervous of the Muslim Brothers. Many secular-minded Arabs fear that if ever they gained power they would never let go. However slickly the Islamists repackage themselves, a strain of intolerance runs through them, particularly in religion. Egypt's 8m Christians, about 10% of the population, are understandably anxious—not least because, to get elected, Mr Morsi will need the support not just of the Brothers but also of the Salafists, a far more worrying band of Islamists who hark back to the puritanism of the Prophet Muhammad's era and who have amassed an alarming degree of popular support in the new Egypt. Already, the Brothers and the Salafists hold a majority in Egypt's parliament. Should a Muslim Brother become president, the risk is that the Islamists will then ride roughshod over the rest. That is the fear of many secular Egyptians; and Israelis are worried too.

But these fears look overblown. Islamism in the Arab world now covers a wide spectrum; and its sensible end has fast been evolving from a radical, violent strain into a modern, outward-looking variant. In Tunisia a party close to the Brothers won power and has started well. In Morocco a similar party has served in coalition, albeit under the king's writ. Even the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers, Hamas, has been groping towards practical politics (see [article](#)). Above all, in Egypt, the Brothers have gone out of their way to shed intolerance and bigotry, espousing—at least on paper—rights for women and Christians, and promising not to close down bars on tourist beaches or ban the wearing of bikinis.

Doubts linger. No one knows how the Islamists would treat minorities if they controlled both arms of government, or how they would revamp the judiciary. On some occasions, Mr Morsi has seemed to back a witch hunt against members of the former regime of Hosni Mubarak; on others, he sounds like a puppet being manipulated behind the scenes.

If there were a decent secular candidate, we would vote for him. But Mr Shafiq, whose mantra is a call for stability and a crackdown on crime, would be a throwback to repression. He was Mr Mubarak's last prime minister, and is unrepentant about the sins of the past government. Mr Shafiq seeks to defend what is known as the "deep state": the military and security establishment that has clung to power since Mr Mubarak's fall. Since then Egyptians in uniform have continued to abuse their powers and spit on human rights.

Better let them rule

Mr Shafiq's campaign has been incompetent. He has espoused crassly populist policies, promising to cancel the debts of farmers. He has spread fear, insinuating that charities are foreign agents and that Islamists will create a bullying Iranian-style revolutionary guard. His desire to shut the Islamists out of power, whatever the popular will, is alarming. Experience shows that forcing them underground only adds to their mystique and saves them from the responsibilities of office.

It is unfortunate that after all the hope and anguish of the past 18 months Egyptians are presented with a choice between the deep state and the Brotherhood. Yet it does not mean that the revolution has failed. Under Mr Mubarak, the country was suffocating. Egyptians now can at least say what they want and vote for whomever they like. If they opt for Mr Morsi and the Brothers, they face a future full of risks. But that is better than a return to the oppressive past under Mr Shafiq.

Article 2.

NYT

At 50, the Cuban Missile Crisis as Guide

Graham Allison

June 15, 2012 -- Fifty years ago, the Cuban missile crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear disaster. During the standoff, President John F. Kennedy thought the chance of escalation to war was “between 1 in 3 and even,” and what we have learned in later decades has done nothing to lengthen those odds. Such a conflict might have led to the deaths of 100 million Americans and over 100 million Russians.

The main story line of the crisis is familiar. In October 1962, a U.S. spy plane caught the Soviet Union attempting to sneak nuclear-tipped missiles into Cuba, 90 miles off the U.S. coast.

Kennedy determined at the outset that this could not stand. After a week of secret deliberations with his most trusted advisers, he announced the discovery to the world and imposed a naval blockade on further shipments of armaments to Cuba.

The blockade prevented additional materiel from coming in but did nothing to stop the Soviets from operationalizing the missiles already there. A tense second week followed during which Kennedy and the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, stood “eyeball to eyeball,” neither side backing down. Saturday, Oct. 27, was the day of decision. At the last minute, the crisis was resolved without war, as Khrushchev accepted a final U.S. offer pledging not to invade Cuba in exchange for the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.

Every president since Kennedy has tried to learn from what happened in that confrontation. Ironically, half a century later, with the Soviet Union itself only a distant memory, the lessons of the crisis for current policy have never been greater.

Today, it can help U.S. policy makers understand what to do — and what not to do — about a range of foreign policy dilemmas, particularly the standoff with Iran over its nuclear program.

The current confrontation between the United States and Iran is like a Cuban missile crisis in slow motion. Events are moving, seemingly inexorably, toward a showdown in which the U.S. president will be forced to choose between ordering a military attack and acquiescing to a nuclear-armed Iran.

Those were, in essence, the two options Kennedy's advisers gave him on the final Saturday: attack or accept Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. But Kennedy rejected both. Instead of choosing between them, he crafted an imaginative alternative with three components: a public deal in which the United States pledged not to invade Cuba if the Soviet Union withdrew its missiles; a private ultimatum threatening to attack Cuba within 24 hours unless Khrushchev accepted that offer; and a secret sweetener that promised the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey within six months after the crisis was resolved.

Looking at the choice between acquiescence and air strikes today, both are unacceptable. An Iranian bomb could trigger a cascade of proliferation, making more likely a devastating conflict in one of the world's most economically and strategically critical regions. A preventive air strike could delay Iran's nuclear progress at identified sites but could not erase the knowledge and skills ingrained in many Iranian heads.

The truth is that any outcome that stops short of Iran having a nuclear bomb will still leave it with the ability to acquire one down the road. The best hope for a Kennedyesque third option today is a combination of agreed-on constraints on Iran's nuclear activities that would lengthen the fuse on the development of a bomb; transparency measures that would maximize the likelihood of discovering any cheating; unambiguous (perhaps secretly communicated) threats of a regime-changing attack should the agreement be violated; and a pledge not to attack otherwise. Such a combination would keep Iran as far away from a bomb as possible for as long as possible.

The Israeli factor makes the Iranian nuclear situation an even more complex challenge for American policy makers than the Cuban missile crisis was. In 1962, only two players were allowed at the main table. Fidel Castro, the Cuban prime minister, sought to become the third, and had he succeeded, the crisis would have become significantly more dangerous. Precisely because the White House recognized that the Cubans could become a wild card, it cut them out of the game. Kennedy informed the Kremlin that it would be held accountable for any attack against the United States emanating from Cuba, however it started.

Today, the threat of an Israeli air strike strengthens President Barack Obama's hand in squeezing Iran to persuade it to make concessions. But

the possibility that Israel might actually carry out a unilateral airstrike without U.S. approval must make Washington nervous, since it makes the crisis much harder to manage. Should the domestic situation in Israel reduce the likelihood of an independent Israeli attack, U.S. policy makers will not be unhappy.

It has been said that history does not repeat itself, but it does sometimes rhyme. Five decades later, the Cuban missile crisis stands not just as a pivotal moment in the history of the Cold War but also as a guide for how to make sound decisions about foreign policy.

Graham Allison is director and professor of government at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Article 3.

NYT

Pinched and Griping in Iran

[Nicholas D. Kristof](#)

June 16, 2012 -- Tehran -- Before beginning my road trip across Iran, I stopped at a shopping mall for computer equipment in Tehran. It was brimming with iPads and iPhones — not to mention [a statuette of Steve Jobs](#) in a store window — and one shop owner smirked condescendingly at my laptop.

“You have a very, very old computer!” he scoffed. “Is this older than I am?”

The encounter was a reminder that Iran is a relatively rich and sophisticated country, more so than most of its neighbors. Yet one lesson from [my 1,700-mile drive around the country](#) is that, largely because of Western sanctions, factories are closing, workers are losing their jobs, [trade is faltering and prices are surging](#). This is devastating to the average Iranian's pocketbook — and pride.

To be blunt, [sanctions are succeeding](#) as intended: They are inflicting prodigious economic pain on Iranians and are generating discontent. One factory owner, Hassan Gambari, who makes electrical panels, told me that he had had to lay off 12 of his 15 workers. Another, Masoud Fatemi,

who makes cotton thread and textiles, said that Western sanctions had aggravated pre-existing economic problems.

“Prices have gone ridiculously high, so production is almost impossible,” he said. “Everything has become harder, more time-consuming and more expensive because of the sanctions.”

Fatemi said that an electrical inverter blew out a year and a half ago, closing one of his factory lines and costing him \$500 a day. Because of sanctions, he said, he has been unable to get a replacement from the West, although he hopes to install one soon from South Korea.

In Tabriz, in the west, I chatted with the owner of a store selling Nike, Adidas and Saucony sneakers, hugely prized as status symbols. If a young man wants to find a girlfriend, the shop owner explained, the best bet is to wear Nikes.

But sales have dropped by two-thirds in the last year, he fretted. He added in disgust that some Iranians are in such penury that they attend parties wearing Chinese-made, fake Nikes.

In March, Iran was pushed out of Swift, [a banking network for international payments](#), so the businessman now pays for his imports through the traditional hawala system. That’s an unofficial global network of money-traders. You lug a briefcase of cash to a hawala office in an Iranian bazaar and then ask for it to be made available in Beijing or Los Angeles. This is more expensive and less reliable than a bank transfer, but it’s now the main alternative.

“We are finding a loophole around sanctions,” a hawala trader told me.

“The Iranian nation has no other option.”

Economic frustration is compounded because [President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been lifting subsidies](#) for everything from bread to gasoline — probably sound economic policy, but very unpopular.

Western sanctions have succeeded in another way: Most blame for economic distress is directed at Iran’s own leaders, and discontent appears to be growing with the entire political system. I continually ran into Iranians who were much angrier at their leaders on account of rising prices than on account of the imprisonment of dissidents or Bahais.

“We can’t do business as we used to, and our quality of life is getting worse,” one man, who lost his job as a salesman, said forlornly. “We blame our regime, not Western countries.”

Economic pressure also may be distracting people from other nationalist issues. For example, many ordinary Iranians side with their government on nuclear issues and are angry at assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. But people are much more focused on lost jobs and soaring prices. “The economy is breaking people’s backs,” a young woman told me in western Iran.

I regret this suffering, and let’s be clear that sanctions are hurting ordinary Iranians more than senior officials. ■ also appalled that the West blocks sales of airline parts, thus risking crashes of civilian aircraft.

Yet, with apologies to the many wonderful Iranians who showered me with hospitality, I favor sanctions because I don’t see any other way to pressure the regime on the nuclear issue or ease its grip on power. My takeaway is that sanctions are working pretty well.

This success makes talk of a military strike on Iranian nuclear sites unwise as well as irresponsible. Aside from the human toll, war would create a nationalist backlash that would cement this regime in place for years to come — just when economic sanctions are increasingly posing a challenge to its survival. No one can predict the timing, but Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen have shown that unpopular regimes that cannot last, don’t.

“People putting bread on the table, bearing the pressure, they have a limit,” said a businessman I chatted with on a beach of the Caspian Sea. “Sooner or later, the limit will come and things will change.”

Insha’Allah. (God willing.)

Article 4.

The Daily Beast

Meet Prince Salman, the Next Saudi King

Bruce Riedel

June 16, 2012 -- For the second time in less than a year, the heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has died in office. Prince Nayif ascended to become Crown Prince last October when his brother Prince

Sultan passed away. Now Nayif has died in Geneva after months of ill health. The good news for Saudis is that his successor is all but certain to be Prince Salman, a more pragmatic and progressive prince with a half century's experience as the governor and builder of the kingdom's capital, Riyadh.

Nayif, born in 1933 and interior minister since 1975, was never a proponent of reform, and advocated a tough line on human-rights issues for decades. He opposed giving women the right to drive, or extending equality rights to the minority Shia. He was a prime mover behind the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain a year ago to smash an incipient Shia reform movement. He hated Iran with a passion intense even by Saudi standards. Nayif was also the most skeptical senior prince about America—he held American intelligence services at arm's length for many years, grudgingly agreeing to increase cooperation only when al Qaeda opened a major offensive to topple the Saudis in 2004.

For Nayif and other Saudi hardliners, the reformist demands for clipping the power of the mukhabarat (secret police) in the kingdom and other Arab states was a direct threat to their authority. From the MOI's inverted pyramid headquarters in Riyadh, Nayif tracked down al Qaeda and its sympathizers with a ruthless zeal. He did the same to Iranian-backed Shia dissidents in Saudi Hizballah. Any and all dissent was smashed.

Nor is the new heir, Prince Salman, a dove on al Qaeda or Iran. Since he became defense minister last year upon Sultan's death, he has aggressively pushed the Saudi military to be ready for conflict with Iran if necessary, and has pushed Yemen to take on al Qaeda. There is no sign he disagrees with the occupation of Bahrain.

Salman also has a reputation, well deserved, for accepting and working with peaceful change.

But Salman also has a reputation, well deserved, for accepting and working with peaceful change in the kingdom. Born on Dec. 31, 1935, he is a son of Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, the modern kingdom's father, and the brother of the current King Abdullah as well as Nayif and Sultan. He is a decade younger than his senior brothers. His health is also poor, but he probably stands a good chance at becoming king when Abdullah dies.

Salman was governor of Riyadh province from 1963 until last year. When he assumed the job, the city was a small remote place with a population of

less than 200,000. Within a decade, it had half a million inhabitants; today, the greater urban area is home to 7 million people. Salman oversaw this huge transformation—including the construction of desalinization plants to bring water, massive highway infrastructure development, and huge housing blocks.

When the city became the capital in the 1980s, replacing Jiddah, Salman oversaw the construction of its diplomatic quarter to house the foreign embassies. The movement of foreign diplomats to Riyadh was a tricky issue. In Jiddah they lived in a more traditionally tolerant Hejazi city; in Riyadh they would be in the heartland of the Saudi Wahhabi fundamentalist Nejd. Salman pulled it off. He also pushed the kingdom to advance in technology and sciences: one of his sons, Sultan bin Salman, became the first Muslim to go into space on an American shuttle flight. Change in Saudi Arabia is a subtle and incremental process. King Abdallah has a well-deserved reputation of being a reformer. Abdallah and Nayif were an odd couple in many ways, one a reformer the other a hardliner. The team of Abdallah and Salman will be more philosophically in harmony than the previous one, and Salman is likely to continue Abdallah's modest reforms without undermining them.

The Arab awakening has put change on the agenda in the kingdom like never before. Young Saudis are watching the revolutions in their neighbors carefully. Shia unrest has grown; women are pushing for more independence and authority. The royal family has spent tens of billions in the last year to buy off dissent. Once the allegiance council, the body created by Abdallah to choose his heir, selects Salman as crown prince, the kingdom will be a little better prepared to handle the storms ahead.

Article 5.

Wall Street Journal

Saudi Crown Prince Nayef Dead

[Ellen Knickmeyer](#)

June 16, 2012 -- Riyadh—The death of Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz al Saud, announced by state media on Saturday, launched oil-rich Saudi Arabia into what analysts said may be one of the last readily forecast successions among the aging sons of the kingdom's founder.

Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, the 76-year-old defense minister, was widely expected to secure appointment in coming days as the new heir to the Saudi throne, experts and ordinary Saudis said.

Prince Salman, while considered somewhat more liberal than his brother Prince Nayef, "represents continuity both domestically and in terms of Saudi foreign policy," said F. Gregory Gause, a University of Vermont instructor and longtime Saudi scholar. "I do not think the death of Prince Nayef presents major issues," Mr. Gause said, in terms of the kingdom's typically cautious, security-centered policies.

However, analysts also noted that, after King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Prince Salman is the last of the powerful and prominent successors to the Saudi throne among the surviving sons of Saudi Arabia's founder, former King Abdulaziz al Saud.

"This is a wake-up call" for the Saudi royal family, said Stephane Lacroix, an assistant professor at France's Sciences Po university who has spent years in Saudi Arabia.

Eight decades after King Abdulaziz founded the kingdom, "All this first generation are finishing," Mr. Lacroix said. "All these big names are almost gone, so you have to make a plan" in terms of passing power on to lesser-known siblings or to the next generation of Saudi royals.

Since the death of King Abdulaziz, who had several wives, the succession has passed from brother to brother, without skipping to the next generation. Crown Prince Nayef was about 79, although his exact birthdate wasn't recorded. He died outside the country, state media said Saturday. It gave no immediate details of his death.

The crown prince had traveled to Switzerland in late May for what authorities said was official and medical reasons, after an extended stay at the Cleveland Clinic in the U.S. earlier in the year.

He was said to have suffered from a number of health problems, though their exact nature was never officially confirmed.

Saudi King Abdullah, who is in his late 80s, issued a statement Saturday imploring God "to reward [Nayef] for what he has done for his religion and

his country."

Nayef succeeded Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud as heir to the throne in October 2011.

Crown Prince Nayef, who was considered closest of his brothers to the country's religious conservatives, would be mourned with religious services Sunday in the Islamic holy city of Mecca, state media said.

The ruling Saudi family, like the government overall, follows the austere Wahhabi branch of Islam. It typically buries its members in the desert, without fanfare.

A family allegiance council with about three dozen people representing major branches of the al Saud family was expected to meet soon to formally nominate the next crown prince.

King Abdullah created the allegiance council, a move toward formalizing the routine for designating the next heir, after he acceded to the throne in 2005.

Crown Prince Nayef had been minister of interior since the 1970s. He helped shape the ministry's counterterror program and the crackdown on al Qaeda, both moves that won him praise from the West.

President Barack Obama, in a statement, offered the U.S.'s condolences and said that under Prince Nayef's leadership, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia "developed a strong and effective partnership in the fight against terrorism."

Crown Prince Nayef's son Prince Mohammed bin Nayef already helps preside over day-to-day operations at the ministry, and experts said they expected the son to continue to play a prominent role in counterterror operations.

Deputy Interior Minister Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a full brother of Nayef, also may play a continuing role at the ministry, analysts said.

Crown Prince Nayef also was seen by Saudis and outsiders as being one of the toughest of the leading royals on political dissent, including by the country's Shiite Muslim minority.

Al-Hayat

Jordan: Nagging Is A Second Nature For The Tribesmen

Jihad el-Khazen

14 June 2012 -- Jordan is facing the worst economic crisis in recent history, a crisis that combines foreign debt, budget deficits, falling foreign currency reserves and pressure on the dinar. This is unprecedented in Jordan's history, and is worse than the crisis of 1988, when Jordan defaulted on its foreign debts.

Nevertheless, one trait the Jordanians have is their fondness for 'showing off'. They do not see that their country is extremely poor in natural resources, with no oil or water, save for 'a little' phosphate. Yet the Jordanians chant "Jordan, Jordan, Jordan" as Japan beats their national team 6-nil in a football match, without Japan's team being a big name in football.

The difference between reality and dreams, and between ambition and ability, is highlighted by the fact that four successive governments have come and gone in 15 months, under Prime Ministers Samir Rifai, Marouf Bakhit, Awn al-Khasawneh, and now Fayez Tarawneh. Perhaps we can also add to them five Justice Ministers in seven months, who are Ibrahim Amoush, Hussein Majali, Salim Al Zoubi, Ibrahim al-Jazi, and Khalifa Sulaiman (the current minister).

Jordan has been my country since I became aware of the world, and will remain so until I depart it. However, I have the professional ability to not let my emotions cloud my judgment. Therefore, I say in all possible objectivity that Jordan is strong and lasting, and there is no danger whatsoever posed to the regime even with the change taking place in the traditional loyalties in the country. Indeed, those who were satisfied are not anymore, and those who weren't have become satisfied now.

In the same sense of objectivity, I say that the natives in Jordan happen to be the people of East Jordan, or the known authentic and honorable Arab tribes, the mainstay of the country who have remarkable chivalry and nobility, in parallel with unyielding nomadic morals.

The people of East Jordan have the right to say that the land (was) our land, but since Prince Abdullah and the Emirate of Transjordan, many Syrians, Circassians and Palestinians came to the country, and recently, Iraqis as well. For this reason, the people of East Jordan feel even more threatened when Israel speaks of “the Alternative Homeland” [for the Palestinians]. Thus we find them insisting on ‘recovering’ their country so that the State, including its institutions like the army and security services, remain in their hands. In truth, there is a strong movement representing this trend, and its ideas can be seen in the slogans being raised, and the big demands being made – rendering them difficult to be met.

In this climate of transformed traditional roles, we find the people of East Jordan protesting while the Palestinians refrain from doing so. To be sure, the Palestinians have always felt marginalized and sometimes even as second-class citizens. While the Palestinians must be considerably concerned by the fact that some Palestinians had their citizenships revoked, they have ultimately reached the conclusion that their conditions in Jordan are better than anywhere else in the Arab world. For this reason, they may complain, but they are now equally keen on preserving the configuration of the regime as the people of East Jordan are.

The protests, demonstrations and demands paint an inaccurate picture of the situation in Jordan, as Jordan is a staple country in its surrounding, and one that enjoys regional and international protection, and has a crucial role to play in the resolution of the Palestinian question, if there is any resolution (we recently read for example that the United States has helped Jordan boost its nuclear security by improving detection of radioactive materials at its borders).

I had noticed some lack of manners in the positions voiced on King Abdullah Bin Al Hussein, with some considering him to be the problem. However, I consider him to be the solution, even if he has been unforthcoming in approving the necessary reforms that reduce his powers, but which are reforms that otherwise protect his power. For this reason, I

can only attribute the slogans or letters that insult the King to a lack of manners.

The National Dialogue Committee submitted near the end of last year a comprehensive paper containing recommendations that the King has yet to implement, recommendations that encompass general principles and guidelines for political reforms, with proposed basic constitutional amendments and an electoral law that enshrines proportional representation, in addition to a law on political parties - and so on and so forth. The Dialogue Committee comprised 50 members who represented all the segments of the people, with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood who boycotted the dialogue and who are now exploiting the Palestinian cause, without this receiving any response from the Palestinians themselves.

Perhaps it would be prudent for the King to hire a number of advisers, or a political kitchen that would bring together credible, honest and trustworthy figures to bridge the confidence gap between the government and the opposition. I suggest that this group's first task should be to fight corruption, both real and perceived corruption, and hold public trials for corrupt officials. This is while bearing in mind that Jordan's position in the Corruption Perceptions Index is good, ranking 56th out of 182 countries, i.e. in the top third of the list.

This should be followed with a strategic plan to address the economic situation, and find a way to streamline the work of constitutional institutions, such as the government, the Royal Diwan and the security services, because it is no longer permissible for each party to be running its own separate agenda, as this was evident in the work of Awn al-Khasawneh's government.

There is a rift in the relations between the people of the Two Banks of the Jordan, but they all support the existing regime, and none other. However, I can explain the tone of the opposition in East Jordan with the fact that nagging seems to be a second nature for the tribesmen. Yet they remain the mainstay of the country, and if I had any problem and a thousand friends to help me solve it, then I would choose to rely on these tribesmen because they are authentic and honorable people.

The Weekly Standard

Seeing Syria Clearly

Lee Smith

June 15, 2012 -- The [Wall Street Journal reports](#) that the White House is helping to coordinate logistics for the Free Syrian Army, but not providing arms. “U.S. intelligence operatives and diplomats have stepped up their contacts with Syrian rebels in part to help organize their burgeoning military operations against President Bashar al-Assad's forces, according to senior U.S. officials.”

This would certainly be promising news—except it is the third time in the last month administration officials have put this rumor forward, and on at least one occasions, officials subsequently walked back the story.

On May 15 the [Washington Post reported](#) that, “Syrian rebels ... have begun receiving significantly more and better weapons in recent weeks, an effort paid for by Persian Gulf nations and coordinated in part by the United States, according to opposition activists and U.S. and foreign officials.” The next day, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland [clarified](#) that the administration had no intention of arming the rebels. As for coordinating arms shipments, presumably from Gulf Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Nuland described the White House’s role much more vaguely. “This is a loose coordination mechanism,” she said.

Then on May 24, [the AP reported](#) that the “Obama administration is preparing a plan that would essentially give U.S. nods of approval to arms transfers from Arab nations to some Syrian opposition fighters.”

So is the administration already playing a logistical role with the FSA, as the Post reported, contemplating playing one, as the AP claimed, or building toward it, as today’s Journal piece argues? Is the White House doing anything at all besides talking on background about doing something?

Part of the confusion is likely intentional. Obama’s Middle East policy is largely one of extricating the United States from the region and withdrawing from traditional commitments. It seems the last thing the president wants to do, especially in an election year, is commit his prestige to a regional civil war.

On the other hand, there's growing pressure on the Hill, led by Senator John McCain, to arm the Syrian opposition, and in the wake of the Houla massacre, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney called for the same. With the body count in Syria soaring, it is getting more difficult for the White House to keep bobbing and weaving. As we've seen over the last few weeks with [the administration's repeated leaks on national security issues](#), one way around this dilemma is to let on to the press that even if it seems like the administration is stalled, it's really doing a lot behind the scenes—thanks to the decisive personal direction of Obama.

At the same time, the White House has been saying for more than a year that it doesn't know who the opposition inside Syria really is. If, as the Journal piece reports, the administration has been meeting with the FSA for six months, why does it still not know who makes up the Syrian opposition? [As Tony Badran explains](#) in his column for NOW Lebanon today, "we've heard senior officials in the Obama administration, from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to UN Ambassador Susan Rice, say that arming the opposition could be tantamount to arming al-Qaeda, since we don't know who this opposition really is."

[U.S. intelligence analysts believe](#) that there may be no "suitable recipients of lethal aid" in the opposition, but more than a year into the uprising, not knowing who the good guys are is no longer a matter of faulty intelligence gathering. Rather, it's a policy decision disguised as doubt. If Obama wanted to back someone in Syria in order to advance American interests, the U.S. intelligence community would have little trouble finding suitable recipients. It hasn't because the White House isn't eager to act. The question is, will moral revulsion at Assad's crimes finally force it off the sidelines?

It's understandable why a conflict that by some estimates has already cost the lives of more than 14,000 would elicit powerful humanitarian concerns. The Obama administration professes to share those concerns, but perversely concludes that it should therefore avoid arming the opposition, because that would only result in more violence. This is of course true in the short term, but from a strategic as well as a moral perspective what should matter is whether the violence would have the effect of bringing down Assad. In the name of "stopping the violence," the administration threw its weight behind a ██████ ceasefire that was unworkable at first

glance, thereby actually guaranteeing that the killing would continue. The ultimate way to stop violence in Syria is to overthrow the regime that foments it.

So in this case, a little grand strategy and attention to U.S interests in the region would actually bring greater moral depth to U.S. policy. We know who the “good guys” (relatively speaking) are. We are allied with Sunni states throughout the region against the Islamic Republic of Iran; by extension the Syrian Sunnis who are taking on Assad, an ally of Iran, are our allies. As Badran explains, a shallow moralism, focused on "violence" has clouded American decision-making and made our policy vulnerable to pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian propaganda (i.e., that Assad's enemies are also violent).

[A recent report](#) from a German newspaper contends that it was the opposition, rather than Assad’s forces, that was responsible for the massacre at Houla. On this reading, it wasn’t Sunnis who were killed en masse, but Alawites and other minorities.

The facts are otherwise. As this list of casualties from the [Houla killings shows](#), the dead were Sunnis, with the majority of them coming from one family, Abd el-Razzaq.

An article yesterday at [National Review Online](#) helps set the record straight, explaining how the German report is part of a larger information campaign on behalf of the regime, [engineered in part by Syria’s Christian community](#) with a very ugly assist by the [Vatican’s news agency](#).

The purpose of this propaganda is obvious. If the White House can’t tell the good guys from the bad guys, here’s information to confuse them further: The really vicious murderers aren’t from the regime but the opposition. It’s worth noting that this particular information operation, claiming that Sunni radicals in the opposition are targeting minorities, comports perfectly with many of the concerns put forth by an administration that says it can’t tell the good guys from the bad.

Most significantly, the White House has been very public about its fear that the opposition may now be [dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood](#), and that backing the opposition might empower Sunni radicals, including elements of al Qaeda. Subsequently, there’s worry that the Sunnis will target the Christian community and take their vengeance against the Alawites, from whom the ruling Assad regime is drawn. The idea then,

now corroborated by this Syrian disinformation campaign, is that the opposition is made up of very bad people. Hence, the White House is confused.

If the Obama administration fears that al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists will dominate the post-Assad political process, then the report that White House intends to coordinate allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar to make sure money and arms gets into the right hands is welcome news. The problem is that the administration's puppet show—the series of stories reporting the same White House plans to coordinate, and then the administration statements walking these plans back—has further obscured the issue when what is needed is clarity.

The United States should be playing the role of the great clarifier—whether its instruments are diplomacy or military support. So far, the Obama administration has only muddied the waters. The other possibility of course is that the administration is just pretending, that it's not confused, but that it just isn't going to do anything. If that's the case, the peculiar result is that the White House has indeed made a strategic decision. In refusing to arm the FSA, Obama has identified who he perceives to be the good guys: compared to the opposition, the Assad regime is preferable.