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[Article 1.](#)
NYT

The Three Faces of President Obama

[Thomas L. Friedman](#)

March 15, 2014 -- Barack Obama is surely the first president to be accused of acting in foreign policy like Pollyanna, John Wayne and Henry Kissinger in the same month.

Ever since Russian President Vladimir Putin's land grab in Crimea, conservatives have denounced President Obama as a man who doesn't

appreciate what a merciless, Hobbesian world this really is. He's a Pollyanna — always looking for people's good side. Meanwhile, liberals have been hammering Obama for what they say is his trigger-happy drone habit, having ordered the targeted killing by air of hundreds of individuals; he's John Wayne, seeking vigilante justice against those who have harmed, or might be planning to harm, the United States. And, just to round things out, Obama has been accused by critics on the left and right of being a Kissingerian hyperrealist who is content to watch the Syrian regime crush its people, because, as tragic as that is, American interests there are minimal.

It can't be easy being Pollyanna, John Wayne and Henry Kissinger all at once. So who is Obama — really — on foreign policy? ■ say less Pollyanna than his critics claim, more John Wayne and Henry Kissinger than ■ admit, but still undefined when it comes to the greatest leadership challenges in foreign policy — which go beyond Crimea but lurk just over the horizon.

If Obama has been a reluctant warrior in Crimea, it's because it's long been part of Russia and home to a Russian naval base, with many of its people sympathetic to Russia. Obama was right to deploy the limited sanctions we have in response to Putin's seizure of Crimea and try to coolly use diplomacy to prevent a wider war over Ukraine — because other forces are at play on Putin. Do not underestimate how much of a fool Putin will make of himself in Crimea this weekend — in front of the whole world — and how much this will blow back on Russia, whose currency and stock markets are getting hammered as a result of Vladimir's Crimean adventure. Putin has organized, basically overnight, a secession referendum on Crimea's future — without allowing any time for the opposition to campaign. It's being held under Russian military occupation, in violation of Ukraine's Constitution, with effectively two choices on the ballot: "Vote 1 if you want to become part of Russia," or "Vote 2 if you really want to become part of Russia." This is not the action of a strong, secure leader. By Monday, it should have its own Twitter hashtag: #Putinfarce.

And if Obama has been a Kissingerian realist in his reluctance to dive into the Syrian civil war, or Ukraine, it's because he has learned from Iraq and Afghanistan that the existence of bad guys in these countries doesn't mean that their opponents are all good guys. Too many leaders in all these

countries turned out to be more interested in using their freedom to loot rather than liberate. Where authentic reformers emerge in Syria or Ukraine we should help them, but, unlike Senator John McCain, most Americans are no longer willing to be suckers for anyone who just sings our song (see dictionary for Hamid Karzai), and they are now wary of owning the bailouts and gas bills of countries we don't understand.

As for John Wayne Obama, "the quickest drone in the West," every American president needs a little of that in today's world, where you now have legions of superempowered angry people who wish America ill and who have access to rockets and live in ungoverned spaces.

So I have no problem with Obama as John Wayne or Henry Kissinger. If you want to criticize or praise him on foreign policy, the real tests fall into two categories: 1) How good is he at leading from behind on Ukraine? And 2) How good is he at leading from in front on Russia, Iran and China?

There is probably no saving Crimea from Putin in the short term, but we do not want to see him move beyond Crimea and absorb the parts of eastern Ukraine where the Russophones reside. We should be ready to offer arms to the Ukraine government to prevent that. But let us never lose sight of the fact that the key to keeping more of Ukraine out of Russia's paws will depend on the ability of Ukrainians to come together in a way that is inclusive of both the majority that sees its future with the European Union and the minority of Russophones who still feel some affinity for Russia.

If the Ukraine drama pits a united Ukraine — seeking a noncorrupt democracy tied to Europe — against a Putin trying to forcibly reintegrate Ukraine into a Russian empire, Putin loses. But if Ukrainians are divided, if hyper-nationalist parties there dominate and pro-Russians are alienated, Putin will discredit the Ukraine liberation movement and use the divisions to justify his own interventions. Then our help will be useless. We can't help them if they won't help themselves. Ukrainians have already wasted a quarter-century not getting their act together the way Poland did.

The big three issues where Obama must lead from the front are: changing the character of Russia's government, preventing Iran from getting a nuke and preventing a war in the South China Sea between Beijing and Tokyo. I will save China and Iran for later.

But regarding Russia, I vehemently opposed NATO expansion because I held the view then, and hold it today, that there is no big geopolitical

problem that we can solve without Russia's cooperation. That requires a Russia that does not define its greatness by opposing us and recreating the Soviet empire, but by unleashing the greatness of its people. It is increasingly clear that that will never be Putin's Russia, which stands for wholesale corruption, increasing repression and a zero-sum relationship with the West. Putin is looking for dignity for Russia now in all the wrong places — and ways. But only Russia's people can replace Putinism. The way the United States and European Union help, which will take time, is by forging new energy policies that will diminish Europe's dependency on Russian gas — the mother's milk of Putinism. But we Americans also have to work harder to make our country a compelling example of capitalism and democracy, not just the world's cleanest dirty shirt when it comes to our economy and not just the best democracy money can buy when it comes to our politics.

The most important thing we could do to improve the prospects of democracy in the world “is to fix our democracy at home,” said Larry Diamond, a democracy specialist at Stanford University. “The narrative of American decline and democratic dysfunction damages the luster of democracy in the world and the decisions of people to feel it is a model worth emulating. That is in our power to change. If we don't reform and repair democracy in the United States, it is going to be in trouble globally.”

[Article 2](#)
NYT

Israel Reaches Out to the Diaspora

[Ethan Bronner](#)

March 15, 2014 -- OVER the past two weeks, Jewish leaders outside [Israel](#) quietly gathered in seminar groups to grapple with a thorny question: how to ensure that Israel is both a Jewish and a democratic state.

While the debate is not new, the discussions — 40 of them, including some in New York, London, Atlanta, Paris and Sydney, Australia — were significant and unprecedented. First, they come at a crucial time in Middle East peace talks with Israel demanding, quite unsuccessfully, [Palestinian](#) recognition of its Jewish identity. Second, they followed the introduction of

a right-wing bill in the Israeli Parliament (set aside for now) aimed at making sure that in conflicts between Jewish and democratic identities, Jewish would win. And third, they were the result of a request for help from Israel, signaling a little-noticed shift in the relationship between the Jewish state and the Jewish world. In the past, signed checks were welcome, advice not so much.

The change is a result of several things. Over the last few years Israel has become the world's largest Jewish community (of the roughly 13 million Jews in the world, just over six million are in Israel and just under six million in the United States) and, along with its recent wealth and might, that has put it in a very different position. It is, for the first time, the senior partner in the Jewish world. It feels more comfortable asking for help and more aware of the need to support Jews abroad rather than demand immigration to Israel. With American Jews intermarrying more, reaching out to them is also a way of strengthening them as an asset.

That is why the Israeli government contributes to programs like Birthright, which brings young Jews for a free visit that has been shown to increase levels of attachment to Israel and Judaism. Over the next five years the Israeli government will spend \$1.4 billion on a range of initiatives to strengthen Jewish identity abroad and Jewish connections to Israel and vice versa. The Mossad spy agency also invests in surveillance and protection of Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union and parts of Latin America.

The request to world Jewry for help in defining the nature of the Israeli state came from Ruth Gavison, an Israeli law professor who has been asked by Tzipi Livni, the justice minister and top peace negotiator, to formulate a constitutional basis for the country's description of itself as Jewish and democratic. By asking for the input of Jews abroad, most of whom are Americans, Professor Gavison is subtly stacking the deck in favor of democracy and the rights of minorities. As Dov Maimon, an Israeli scholar and public policy expert, put it, "We in Israel are more tribal and becoming more so every year. In America, Jews are more secular and democratic." The seminars involved several dozen political and rabbinical leaders in each Jewish community. They were led by Shmuel Rosner, an Israeli journalist and book publisher employed by the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank that seeks to bridge Israel with world

Jewry. (He is also a contributing opinion writer to the International New York Times.) He said the debates were often difficult.

“They were searching for that elusive thing that combines peoplehood, nation, religion, culture and shared history,” he said. “Diaspora Jews don’t like religion as it is practiced in Israel because it is dominated by the ultra-Orthodox. But the national element is also problematic because they are other nationalities and don’t want to cast doubt on that.”

Stuart Eizenstat, a former senior American diplomat who is co-chairman of the institute, said that he was struck by how uncomfortable some participants were in the discussion he took part in near Washington. “Most American Jews go to Israel and want to identify with the Jewish homeland but they haven’t been forced to come to terms with these issues,” he said. With 20 percent of Israel’s population non-Jewish and hardly any agreement among the other 80 percent on the meaning of “Jewish” (Is it a religion, a culture, an ethnicity?), there are challenges in all directions. Democracy, after all, is about principles of neutrality and equality; Jewishness is about particularity and group affiliation. Since for most Israelis the very point of Zionism is Jewish political sovereignty, one obvious concern is how to ensure equality for non-Jews. Should the law of return, granting instant Israeli citizenship to Jews, remain on the books? Should the national anthem, which speaks of a “Jewish soul yearning,” be more inclusive? And, again, what is Jewish? For ultra-Orthodox Jews, who believe in daylong Torah study — nearly 10 percent of the population and growing rapidly — the answer is different from that of a secular laborer. THE issue was a lightning rod for debate leading up to Parliament’s passing landmark legislation on Wednesday [phasing out exemptions from military service](#) for many ultra-Orthodox students. For most Israelis, this legal change is a way of spreading the national burden more evenly and bringing the ultra-Orthodox into the mainstream. But Moshe Gafni, an ultra-Orthodox politician, expressed much of his community’s contempt when he said of the law, “Today Israel lost the right to be called a Jewish state.”

The American Jews who gathered to discuss Israel overwhelmingly felt that the Palestinians should be required to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The Palestinian view is that the 20 percent of Israel that is Palestinian would officially face second-class status, and any hope for a recognition of

the Palestinian right of return to pre-1948 homes in what is today Israel would be lost. That is a key question facing Secretary of State John Kerry as he prepares a peace framework.

Professor Gavison, who has also consulted with Israeli and foreign constitutional experts and will prepare her report for Minister Livni in the coming months, has indicated that she is not convinced this issue can be solved through legal definition. But she will certainly include the views of Jews abroad. As Avinoam Bar-Yosef, an Israeli who is president of the Jewish People Policy Institute, put it, “American Jews want a more open and pluralistic Israel, with attention to minority rights for Arabs and acceptance of different forms of Judaism. Like us, they are trying to define the rights of non-Jews and how to deal with the Jewish symbols of the state. Their input will make an important difference.”

Ethan Bronner is the deputy national editor and a former Jerusalem bureau chief for The New York Times.

[Article 3.](#)

Now Lebanon

Saudi Moves

Michael Weiss

March 15, 2014 -- That the United States has had no credible Syria policy for three years because President Obama has been preoccupied by striking an accommodation with Iran on its nuclear weapons program has almost, but not quite, reached the level of conventional wisdom, whatever protestations the administration has made to the contrary. A somewhat more contentious corollary of this argument is that Obama is actually doing more than just bartering over the delay of Iran’s nuclear breakout capacity – he is experimenting with American détente or rapprochement with the Islamic Republic, which would easily be the foreign policy legacy of his presidency, tantamount to Nixon opening up China. If it worked.

This grander theory has been advanced by my colleague Tony Badran and by the Brookings Institution’s Michael Doran; it has also been floated as a likely (hazardous) perception of the president’s move to lessen sanctions

on Iran by [Henry Kissinger and George Schultz](#). The evidence substantiating it has even come in the form of subtle admissions made by Obama himself in interviews with what ■ sure were carefully selected journalists, [David Remnick](#) and [Jeffrey Goldberg](#).

But a less explored aspect of this what-if question has been the anxiety with which the very possibility of a US-Iranian realignment has been registered by America's Gulf allies, the biggest and most influential of them in particular. The anxiety reads something like this: Almost a decade and a half on from 9/11 and two long and unpopular wars in the Middle East, Washington has tired of its postwar partnership with Saudi Arabia. Might the US therefore be in the early stages of not just engaging the epicenter of Shia Islam but of making it the new, preferred guarantor or subcontractor on regional "stability"?

To "get Iran to behave in a more responsible fashion," as Obama told Remnick a few months ago, would be the theoretical short-term gain of bringing the mullahs in from the cold. But the practical long-term effect could well be trading Riyadh for Tehran as America's regional client, or at least making it competitive for the role.

If you listen closely, you will hear this very idea being celebrated in Washington circles as sensible and long overdue, and not just by the likes of Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett. The increasingly influential online publication Al-Monitor, which markets the Revolutionary Guard and the Syrian mukhabarat to English-speaking audiences, has made it something of an editorial mission statement. Ryan Crocker, the serially employed US diplomat who not long ago turned down Obama's offer of continued public service – this time as the State Department's lead policy planner on Syria – has more or less fantasized openly about the CIA and the Revolutionary Guard running joint operations, and this in the definitive profile written of Machiavellian IRGC commander [Qassem Suleimani](#), no less. Even Obama has never quite [described](#) the Saudis in terms he's fond of applying to himself: "[I]f you look at Iranian behavior," he told Goldberg, "they are strategic, and they're not impulsive. They have a worldview, and they see their interests, and they respond to costs and benefits." (Overseeing the slaughter of Sunnis and underwriting both Hezbollah and [Al-Qaeda](#) in the Levant is a kind of non-impulsive, cost-benefit strategy, I suppose.)

The perception that a swapping of US client states is being entertained seems to have had a discernible impact on Saudi Arabia's decision-making of late. Ironically, if any realignment stands a chance of success, it will be between Washington and Riyadh, which has grown smarter in its method with dealing with the current administration.

The first indication that a form of couple's therapy had been initiated by the kingdom came in mid-February when Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Gulf official best acquainted with the United States, and the one most exasperated by its current course in the Middle East, was replaced by Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as the Saudi point-man on Syria. Bandar's problem was that he was seen as too gung-ho for regime change in Damascus and too willing to employ unsavory Islamist rebels to make that a reality. John Kerry called him "the problem" in Riyadh's approach to Syria. Other US officials described him as "hot-headed" and "erratic" (as against Iran's cool-headed pragmatism, no doubt.) Prince Mohammed, on the other hand, gets on well with the Secretary of State and with CIA Director John Brennan. He met with and impressed national security advisor Susan Rice last month. He has also "won praise in Washington for his counterterror work against al Qaeda in Yemen and elsewhere," as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on Feb. 19, and is thus amenable to a White House which values the fight against Al-Qaeda in Syria as the only one worth waging. All Prince Mohammed lacks is a Twitter account.

While the focus of that Journal article was on how this royal personnel reshuffle augured a more "cautious" or "diplomatic" Saudi policy, there also came the interesting disclosure that it was Prince Mohammed who was best placed to persuade the United States to allow surface-to-air missiles to reach designated rebel groups in Syria. The Saudis are not, it seems, all that quiescent or revisionist when it comes to hitting Assad where it hurts. Having a counterterrorism guru in charge of overseeing the distribution of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) has lowered the volume on US objections that these devices will fall into the hands of extremists. The missile systems are now sitting in warehouses in Turkey and Jordan. And the Saudis reiterated again to members of the US Senate last week that they were going forward with sending them into Syria.

New, lighter arms have begun to trickle again in conjunction with rebel plans to push into southern Damascus and reclaim terrain lost by them in the months since the Ghouta chemical weapons attack. The “southern offensive,” which began as an operation known evocatively as Geneva Horan, aims to secure Quneitra, Suweida, and Deraa as a rebel buffer zone free of both regime forces and jihadists. The Saudis are shrewdly selling this plan to Obama, now said to be groping for new “options” after the predictable failure of Geneva II, as a way of facilitating his favored political solution through their favored military means.

Then last week came the blacklisting. The Saudi Interior Ministry designated three groups as terrorist entities: Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, and the Muslim Brotherhood. It further announced that it intends to prosecute any national who supports any of them “financially or morally” or who advocates on their behalf through news or social media. The Ministry also banned the recruitment or proselytization of foreign fighters “in conflict zones in other countries” (with one clearly in mind) and gave Saudi muhajireen 15 days to return home or be tossed into the clink where, in accordance with King Abdullah’s edict in February, they could remain for 20 years. This move was undertaken with the full awareness that both Iran and Syria have been furiously propagandizing themselves as regional antagonists of Salafi-jihadism, and allies-in-waiting in America’s global war on terror.

As NOW has observed, the ban probably won’t affect the less threatening Syrian and Lebanese incarnations of the Brotherhood, with which the Saudis [still deal](#). But the State Department, no doubt happy to see Nusra and ISIS proscribed, has yet to [adopt a strenuously fault-finding attitude](#) about the addition of the entire movement to a terrorism list; it just disagrees. Why? The Brotherhood remains a four-letter word in Foggy Bottom because of its disastrous management of Egypt before the Sisi coup, which Saudi Arabia backs financially and morally and which the United States avoids talking about whenever possible. And the Islamist movement’s main patron in the Gulf happens to be a joint US-Saudi bête noire.

Indeed, the growing isolation and censure of Qatar is an area of congruence between Washington and Riyadh, even if the former does not, because it cannot, say so publicly. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab

Emirates last week recalled their ambassadors from Doha in protest of Qatar's "interference in their internal affairs." What Prince Bandar once witheringly termed "only 300 people and a television channel" has now become an international security threat to the Gulf Cooperation Council – and to the United States.

As Jeffrey Goldberg [reported](#) on March 12, the same countries that pulled their envoys from Doha also sent their foreign ministers to Kuwait last month to berate Qatar's emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hama al-Thani for sponsoring a host of regional and cross-sectarian nasties that include the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza, Hamas' Brotherhood kin in Egypt, and Nusra in Syria. Much of this meeting, ■ told by another source, centered on the noxious role played by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the sinister Al Jazeera cleric whom the Saudis believe (quite rightly), speaks with Qatari state sanction. Sheikh Tamim denied it all, even against hard evidence proffered by the foreign ministers.

Qatar, as it happens, has been teaming up with Iran outside of Yemen. It's helped arrange for Hamas's renewed financing by Tehran, financing that had been cancelled two years ago after the Syria uprising pitted the jihadist group against its hosts in Damascus. Since then, and until recently, Hamas had been entirely reliant on Qatari and Turkish subsidies. (Its reconciliation with Iran evidently took place through two meetings, one in Ankara, the other in Doha.) A stronger, wealthier Hamas will certainly prove an obstacle to John Kerry's pursued peace plan between Israel and the Saudi-backed Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

You'll have noticed that a consignment of M-302 surface-to-surface missiles was interdicted on March 5 by Israeli naval commandos in the Red Sea, off the coast of Sudan. The missiles were intended for Hamas, but the circuitous route they took to get to Gaza merits scrutiny. They flew from Damascus to Tehran to Bandar Abbas, and then sailed to Umm Qasr and onto Port Sudan. It won't have escaped King Abdullah's or Prince Mohammed's attention that high-tech weapons intended for a rival faction to the PA had to move from Syria to Iran to Iraq before coming close to their intended recipients. Bashar's not just exporting hardware to Hezbollah next door; he's returned to the status quo ante, and all this while the mullahs are trying to be chums with Kerry's boss.

For months now, there have been rumors that a US-Iranian rapprochement might prompt a quiet Saudi-Israeli one. (Again, even Obama himself has indicated that two historical foes uniting out of mutual hatred for his statecraft is at least a step in the right direction for Middle East harmony.) The Saudis tipped off the Israelis about America's secretive conclaves with the Iranians in Oman, and everyone is familiar with what Riyadh's private attitude would be if IAF jets took off tomorrow for Natanz or Qom. But notice the absence of news items suggesting that the IDF or Israeli intelligence have got a problem with running MANPADs to Syrian rebels. The Saudis think strategically, and they have their interests to pursue, too. In November, they were refusing a seat at the UN Security Council in disgust at US policies in the Middle East. Now, they're making the case that arming their clients in Syria will not only batter Assad into a compromise and contain the proliferation of Al-Qaeda, but that doing so will have the added benefit of robbing state-sponsored terrorists of a crucial transport nexus, in addition to improving the conditions for other forms of ambitious American deal-making in the region. This may not be a "charm offensive" in the Rouhani-sense, but it's a case. The question now becomes: What will Iran's counteroffer look like?

Michael Weiss is a columnist at NOW. He also writes a weekly column for Foreign Policy and is a fellow at the Institute of Modern Russia.

[Article 4.](#)

Agence Global

U.S.-Iran Negotiations: Parallel Dilemmas

Immanuel Wallerstein

15 Mar 2014 -- For the last month or so there have been formal negotiations between the United States and Iran on nuclear questions. Actually, the negotiations had been going on unofficially and secretly for over six months. Technically the group negotiating with Iran is the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the ██████ Security Council plus Germany). But the P5+1 is largely a cover for the key negotiator, the United States. The public stance of each side is identical. They each have a primary objective, but their objectives are different ones. They each say

they have issues of principle upon which they cannot compromise. Nonetheless, they each seem to be guided by what Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has called "heroic leniency." There are further parallels. U.S. President Barack Obama and Iran President Hassan Rouhani both seem to want an arrangement that will avoid armed conflict. This is because each believes that armed conflict would have very negative consequences for both their countries and them personally. In the case of Obama, he won his election originally on a platform calling for the end of the war in Iraq. He does not want his legacy defined as the president who involved the United States in a third major war in the Middle East in the twenty-first century. Quite apart from historical legacy, he believes a war would ruin any chances for passing the domestic legislation he is urgently seeking. He also fears that a war would increase the likelihood of the Democrats losing the presidential election in 2016. In the case of Rouhani, he was elected with the tacit consent of Ayatollah Khamenei and the active support of large parts of the ever-increasing middle classes, both of whom saw him as the only major Iranian leader who might be able to negotiate successfully with the United States. Should he fail, he might be deposed as president, and in any case his internal political agenda would probably lose all possibility of achievement. A war would of course have more immediate destructive consequences for Iran than for the United States, but in the longer run the damage would be enormous for the United States as well. The basic problem is that the primary objective of the two countries is defined in almost contradictory manners. The United States says it wants assurances that Iran will not and cannot develop nuclear weapons. Iran says it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons but insists it has the right that every other country in the world has—to develop increased capacity for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The negotiators are presumably seeking a magic formula that would bridge the gap between these two definitions of the situation. Each needs to be able to present the final text as a victory for its objectives. This seems an extremely difficult task even if both sides are negotiating in good faith. And furthermore, what is good faith? There are persons and groups in both countries who do not consider that the other side is negotiating in good faith or has any intention of a compromise. There are even persons or groups who do not think any compromise is desirable. So both Obama and Rouhani are under constant

pressure not to make "concessions" of any significance. And both Obama and Rouhani seem to have to prove from time to time that they will not yield on matters of principle. The internal critics keep asserting that the other country is "playing for time" while secretly pursuing its true unavowed objectives. Negotiations cannot go on for too long without very negative political consequences for both leaders. One can only guess how long is too long, but I think one year from now is the most we have to reach an agreement. It seems to me not too likely that there will be such an agreement in that time span. The question therefore is—what happens then?

There are really only two alternative scenarios. The unhappy one is that in both countries political control falls into the hands of persons who will pursue their objectives as militantly as possible, menacing the other country with some kind of armed action. Once we start down that path, it would be not too difficult for someone or some group, deliberately or not, to launch the conflict. The third major Middle East war of the twenty-first century would start, and it would probably be the most damaging in its results for both countries. Furthermore, it would undoubtedly spread throughout the region.

There is another less disastrous scenario. It is that nothing much would happen. Negotiations may stop for a while and the current proponents of negotiations may fall out of grace to be replaced by more militant leaders. However, public opinion in both countries may still push their leaders to be cautious. And the military on both sides may warn the civilian leadership that armed action is too risky.

The second scenario is of course better than the first. But it doesn't resolve anything. The situation festers. Neither country can move forward seriously to improve conditions in its own country. And the second scenario is always chancy, possibly turning into the first scenario after a while.

Ergo, what? The current negotiations are our best hope, indeed our only hope, for a somewhat positive outcome.

*Immanuel Wallerstein, Senior Research Scholar at Yale University, is the author of *The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World* (New Press).*

Why Qatar Still Loves the Muslim

Brotherhood

[Frida Ghitis](#)

March 13, 2014 -- What does a gambler do when a large bet suddenly looks like it's riding on a losing hand? Many will fold and cut their losses. Others push ahead, even doubling down, hoping their game plan will ultimately pay off.

The emirate of Qatar has opted for the second approach in its high-stakes gamble to support the Muslim Brotherhood. With the Brotherhood losing ground dramatically after sweeping to multiple victories in what was once known as the Arab Spring, [Qatar is sticking with its strategy](#) and paying an increasingly high cost for its reluctance to change course.

The unavoidable question is why, exactly, is the Qatari regime still backing the Muslim Brotherhood?

Qatar's neighbors are growing increasingly impatient with Doha's embrace of the Islamist group. The days of quiet diplomacy have come and gone. Last week, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates [withdrew their ambassadors](#) from Doha, and Egypt quickly followed suit. When President Barack Obama arrives in Saudi Arabia later this month, he will find an unprecedented rift within the traditionally pro-American Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with key U.S. allies at loggerheads over their approach to the embattled Islamist group.

Gulf states see the Brotherhood as a dangerous threat. Saudi Arabia just declared the group a terrorist organization. The UAE is imprisoning suspected members. In nearby Egypt, the military-installed government views it as an enemy to be destroyed. All the while, Qatar has become the Brotherhood's last best friend, hosting some of its leaders, including exiled Egyptians, providing funding and supporting the efforts of Brotherhood allies in Syria.

Qatar's neighbors are exasperated with Doha's television network, Al Jazeera, whose Arabic channel [airs sermons by Youssef al-Qaradawi](#), the

Brotherhood preacher who regularly lambastes the regimes in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, now joined by exiled Egyptians railing against the post-coup government.

Qatar's Gulf neighbors, led by Riyadh, have demanded that Doha end its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, something the emirate adamantly refuses to do, saying one of its foreign policy principles is supporting the quest for freedom and justice in the Arab world.

The decision years ago by recently retired Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani and his prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al Thani, to support the Islamist group [always looked like a risky bet](#). After all, the Brotherhood has always wanted to upend the status quo in the Arab world, one that has been highly beneficial to Qatar's dynastic regime, which in many ways resembles the ones the Brotherhood has sought to replace.

And yet, Hamad apparently believed he was leveraging the power of a force destined to succeed throughout the region and thus protect the emirate from the Brotherhood's fury and strengthen Doha in its rivalry with Saudi Arabia.

If the Muslim Brotherhood ultimately succeeded in dominating the Arab Middle East, then perhaps Qatar, as its financier and protector, would benefit from the Brotherhood's gratitude. Perhaps Doha envisioned something akin to what happens in Saudi Arabia, where the al Saud family's rule is shored up by a mutual protection arrangement put in place with the powerful Wahhabi clerics.

The risk was that the Brotherhood would eventually turn on its protectors, even if Qatar helped it rise to power. But that risk is an afterthought, at least for now. Instead, what Qatar has is a neighborhood filled with fury at its alliance with the Brotherhood.

In the past, Doha managed to play conflicting agendas with surprising success. That luck may have run out.

Hamad and his right-hand man led the tiny emirate on a daring foreign policy ride, turning their minuscule spit of land into a powerful global platform and making the Persian Gulf emirate a major global player, capable of exerting outsize influence.

The emir launched the Al Jazeera network, which irked unelected rulers, while the royal family simultaneously rubbed elbows with other

monarchical rulers. Qatar gave strong backing to Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Palestinian group in Gaza, which is labeled a terrorist entity by Washington, even while hosting America's largest military base in the Middle East, the massive Combined Air and Space Operations Center at al-Udeid.

For a while, the policy seemed to be working. In the earliest stages of the revolts, back in 2011, Qatar gained a great deal of goodwill among an Arab public exhilarated with the possibility of democracy. Al Jazeera gave wall-to-wall coverage to events in Cairo's Tahrir Square and elsewhere, openly supporting the protesters' demands.

In the next phase of the uprisings, Al Jazeera continued cheering, but its backing for the Muslim Brotherhood became a source of concern for the liberal and leftist forces within the uprising. In Egypt, the epicenter of the wave of Arab revolutions, the Muslim Brotherhood quickly moved to the forefront of the post-dictatorship phase. When the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi won the presidential election and the Brotherhood gained control of the parliament, wealthy Qatar was right there, quick to offer strong financial support.

Qatar gave substantial aid to Brotherhood branches throughout the region, helping them win elections, overthrow dictators and finance their administrations.

When Hamad stepped down last year in favor of his son, GCC neighbors hoped the new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, would change directions.

By then, the Brotherhood's fortunes had taken a negative turn, to the delight of most Gulf rulers. Since the toppling of the Morsi government in Egypt, GCC countries have opened their coffers to the new Egyptian rulers. But Tamim has not relented.

Today, gratitude [has turned to bitterness](#) in places like Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and elsewhere, where Qatar's support for one brand of Islam is viewed as unwelcome interference by millions.

Doha, however, still believes in the long-term viability of its bet. It obviously thinks it has more to gain than lose. It continues to view Saudi Arabia as a regional rival. The emir and his father do not forget that Riyadh opposed the 1995 coup that brought Hamad to power.

With the Middle East in turmoil, the outcome of the Iranian nuclear

negotiations still uncertain, the fighting in Syria raging and Egypt in transition, the Qatari rulers view the Muslim Brotherhood as their ace in the hole. They are not prepared to throw it away.

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[Article 6.](#)

Scientific American

How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World

[Mitchell Stephens](#)

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Mar 14, 2014 -- Science's contributions to the spread of disbelief is the least controversial segment of the virtuous cycle for which I am arguing in seventeenth-century Europe. For science's methods are clearly troublesome for religion. The devout, to begin with, are not wont to view their precepts merely as propositions to be controverted or confirmed. The orthodox, as a rule, are used to arguments being settled by authority, not experiment. The hope belief offers does not always stand up well to observation and experience: life sometimes works out okay; sometimes it doesn't. Faith, particularly of the "certain-because-impossible" variety, and reason have long been tussling. Miracles are notoriously miserly with evidence. Revelation does not lend itself to experimental verification. And the mystical, by its nature, fails to produce facts.

When it is employed, the scientific method, consequently, has a way of uncovering information that is inconvenient for religion. Conflicts are inevitable with ancient holy books—most of which do end up proclaiming something or other on "how" the earth works or "heaven goes." Scientists in these centuries diverged from Scripture at their peril. Galileo learned that. But in the end the greater cost would be borne by the holy books.

Catholic leaders did indeed have reason to fear that, in taking Copernicus' theory seriously, Galileo might encourage people to take the Bible less seriously.

Consider, for another example, the questions reason and experience were, cautiously, raising in Europe at this time about the account of Noah's flood in Genesis: From whence did all that water—enough to cover “all the highest mountains everywhere”—come? Where did it go after those “forty days and forty nights” ended? How could one ark (Genesis specifies its dimensions) hold so many pairs of creatures? Were fish or birds on board? Observations led to more questions: what about all those new animals being discovered in America?

The discovery of fossils of sea animals far from the sea seemed to some scientists to provide a needed boost to the credibility of the flood story. “From all this,” one scientist told the Royal Society at the start of the eighteenth century, “it sufficiently appears, that there was a time when the water overflowed all our earth, which could be none but the Noachian deluge.” One of the seventeenth century's great fossil collectors and naturalists, John Ray, thought the matter out a little more deeply, however, and noted that a quick flood should have deposited sea animals evenly over the earth, which was not how fossils were distributed. Ray also observed that some of those fossilized sea animals no longer exist. Shouldn't they have been saved with Noah on the ark?

And with science continuing to pick up speed, new observations kept arriving. The British scientist Edmond Halley undertook some calculations in 1694:

The Rain of forty Days and Nights will be found to be a very small Part of the Cause of such a Deluge, for supposing it to rain all over the Globe as much in each Day, as it is now found to do in one of the rainiest Counties of England in the whole Year, viz. about forty Inches of Water per Diem, forty such Days could cover the whole Earth with but about twenty two Fathom Water, which would only drown the low Lands next the Sea. Halley did have to abjure. Acting on the advice of “a person whose judgment I have great cause to respect,” he hastily retreated from his incautious analysis. However, the doubts being raised about holy writ by scientifically inclined minds were not so easily eased. John Keill, a scientist with a strong religious bent, saw the danger: “These contrivers of

Deluges have furnished the Atheist with an argument which . . . is not so easily [redacted] as their theories are made,” Keill concedes.

Religion is resilient, no doubt about that. When discussions in sacred texts become difficult to defend as historical they are defended as metaphorical. Still, seventeenth-century science was increasingly placing religion on the defensive. When biblical tales such as that of Noah are shown to have been unlikely, that makes it a little harder to subscribe to the truth of the Bible and a little easier to dismiss it.

In 1623, Marin Mersenne, a monk who was at the center of a lively and productive intellectual correspondence, insisted that Paris alone harbored 50,000 atheists. In 1652, the English physician and scientist Walter Charleton wrote that his country “has of late produced . . . more swarms of atheistical monsters . . . than any age, than any nation has been infested withal.” Both likely were exaggerating or mislabeling attenuated Christianity as atheism. Europe’s infestation of true, there-is-no-God “atheistical monsters” was probably still rather small.

But disbelief was, indeed, growing. And the science in which both Mersenne, an important correspondent of Galileo’s, and Charleton were participating was taking the lead in that questioning: Did the sun really stop in the sky for Joshua? Was the entire earth actually flooded? If the mathematics of gravity can explain movements of the planets, what need is there for an omnipotent Being?

Scientists can, of course, be religious. With rare exceptions (Galileo and Halley possibly among them), the men who made the Scientific Revolution appear to have sensed God behind what they were learning of the natural world. Their increasingly diligent observations, their telescopes and their microscopes enabled them to see what humans had never before seen.

Their first reaction was awe, and they understood awe as a religious emotion: “Tis the contemplation of the wonderful order, law and power of that we call nature,” writes Robert Hooke, inventor of the microscope, “that does most magnify the beauty and excellency of the divine providence, which has so disposed, ordered, adapted and empowered each part so to operate as to produce the wonderful effects which we see.”

The logic of these awe-struck early scientists sometimes appears to have flagged, as the historian Richard S. Westfall has noted: The “beauty and excellency” of the universe are used to prove that there is a God, and He is

good. And if we see things that are ugly and unpleasant—such as “mice, cockroaches or snakes”? Well, they simply “serve,” as Walter Charleton put it, “as a foil to set off beauty.” How do we know that? Because, in essence, there is a God and He is good.

A similarly circular path leads to the conclusion that, in the words of that proponent of experimentation Francis Bacon, “the world was made for man.” This happy fact is demonstrated by the world’s multitudes of helpful touches, including, according to one of these scientists, the horse’s ear, which conveniently turns backward to better hear commands. Thus we comprehend God’s plan. And if we happen to see some things that don’t appear to be doing a lot for humankind—distant heavenly bodies, for example, or the aforementioned snakes—well, that’s just a sign that we can never fully comprehend God’s plan.

Isaac Newton, the greatest of these “natural philosophers,” shared the awe felt by his contemporaries and drew similar conclusions from it. (There appears to have been a fair amount of feigning religious belief in the seventeenth century, but it seems unlikely that Newton’s expressions of faith could be explained that way since they appear in numerous private as well as public writings.) Indeed, he added the following line to the second edition of his monumental *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*: “This most elegant system of the sun, planets, and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.” Some scientists at the time found evidence of this “design” in the complexity of the universe; Newton, having worked out his astoundingly powerful means for understanding the universe, marveled, instead, at “the simplicity in all the works of the Creator.”

Yet Newton and these other seventeenth-century scientists generally managed to keep their awe from interfering with their investigations. The first edition of Newton’s *Principia*, published in 1687, did not contain any discussion of “an intelligent and powerful being.” It does not contain any discussion of theology whatsoever. It was only after his book was criticized by Gottfried Leibniz and others for impiety—for presenting space, gravity and the universe in a way that appeared not to support an orthodox conception of God—that Newton added a section discussing God’s role. Newton believed, but he had initially managed to produce a

mathematical understanding of motion, which merely made intelligible the workings of the entire cosmos, without any overt reference to that belief. The first edition of Newton's book, with God conspicuously absent, helps form, then, another segment of the virtuous cycle created by science and disbelief ("atheism" would be too strong a word here) in seventeenth-century Europe. The argument is that if Newton had dwelt in his book on God's role, he might not have done such a magnificent job of working out gravity's role. If he were more fearful of challenging understandings of God, if he were more content with ceding responsibility to the whims of God, if he thought human reason could never comprehend God's Creation, Newton might not have been able to outline so persuasively a physics and mathematics that manage to function so impressively on their own.

Isaac Newton was not above dabbling in the occult. He spent decades experimenting with alchemy—making use of mystical sources and hoping to come upon long-lost mystical secrets. The man who devised calculus, understood inertia and quantified gravity also seemed obsessed (a word that often comes to mind with Newton) with uncovering hidden secrets in the Bible, which included, he suspected, a chronology of the past and the future.

Newton was, in other words, ready to use religion in his immense and unceasing efforts to figure things out. But he was less ready to allow religion to interfere with those efforts. "It is the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion ever to be fond of mysteries," Newton writes, "and for that reason to like best what they understand least."

"The progress of religion is defined," writes the early-twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, "by the denunciation of gods." Gods become fewer in number until there is only one—or a Father, Son and Holy Ghost adding up to one. And the qualities of the lonely God that is left are also denounced. He loses His home: God is no longer to be found inside a temple or even, after airplanes, enthroned atop a cloud. He loses His physical form: His beard, His voice, perhaps His body or even His gender. He is neither seen nor heard in public. He grows wispier, more abstract.

Newton, the scientist, probably was responsible for subtracting—denouncing—among the most important of God's qualities: his daily

responsibility for the workings of the heavens. And in his private scribblings on religion, Newton engaged in a fair number of additional denunciations, too.

This mathematician, who taught at Cambridge's Trinity College, was, for example, offended by the odd arithmetic of the Trinity—insisted upon by Anglicans as well as Catholics. He inclined, in his private writings, toward a view of Jesus as human rather than as one of three parts of one God. In addition, this physicist was suspicious, as was Spinoza, of the idea that miracles “are the works of God” rather than just rare and poorly understood phenomena. Like Spinoza, Newton, when writing for himself, also had no use for a corporeal view of God. Indeed, Newton—when not looking for hidden predictions, at least—was partial to Spinoza's reading of the Bible as a human document.

In the historian Richard S. Westfall's view, Newton was a “religious rationalist.” He was looking for a stripped-down version of religion: one compatible with his physics. He was also looking for the principle that all religions have in common: “the law of righteousness and charity,” he called it. A religious rationalist, however, is not an easy thing to be. To maintain a rational view of “the Author of the system” it would be necessary, for example, to resolve the contradictions that seem inherent in most conceptions of God. There is, for example, that old conundrum about omnipotence—given a twenty-first-century formulation on *The Simpsons*: “Could Jesus microwave a burrito so hot that He Himself could not eat it?” There is also Carneades' argument, presented in chapter 2, that a being without flaws or weaknesses couldn't exhibit virtues. One question Newton and his contemporaries certainly struggled with was what role a Perfect Being would have after a presumably perfect Creation. Wouldn't He be redundant post-Genesis—after functioning as the First Cause? Wouldn't Jehovah end up resembling one of the Epicurean gods—left with no responsibility but to enjoy Himself?

A “religious rationalist” would also somehow have to get right the relationship between the natural and the supernatural: what status would natural laws have if a Being exists who is outside of them and violates them at least for the Creation? It would be necessary, too, to square science's methods with any sort of reliance upon religious authority, including that Bible whose secrets Newton was so interested in revealing.

In addition, to be a “religious rationalist,” in Newton’s sense, would require precipitating “righteousness and charity” out of holy texts that do not always seem to embody them and out of a universe that does not always seem to display them.

These tasks may have been beyond the abilities of even this most able of men. Newton wrote out his private treatises on religion—and then rewrote them and rewrote them again. One appeared in at least five versions. As an old man, the Isaac Newton who had gotten the physics of the heavens right was still trying to get this rational view of Christianity right.

But by then Newton had denounced enough to leave a rather hazy, unobtrusive God. In Newton’s understanding, and that of many of his scientifically inclined contemporaries, God was losing not only eyes, a nose, bluster and his two other manifestations, but the inclination to fiddle with natural laws.

So although he was a believer, Newton and his contemporaries help demonstrate what disbelief—or, in his case, limited belief—can contribute to science. His rejection of some of the more mystical and intrusive conceptions of God was probably necessary in order to give the sun and the planets leave to abide by equations. Newton’s physics, the point is, benefited from the rejection of some religious belief.

Science usually does. Its progress, we might say, is “defined” by the diminution of God. Science requires some separation from church. This was, after Galileo, becoming available in Europe in the seventeenth century. Hobbes and Spinoza—however wary they may have been about speaking too “boldly”—helped. And the tendency of scientists—Newton among them—to push aside assumptions they considered irrational or unhelpful certainly helped. Newton’s ability to leave God entirely out of the first edition of *Principia Mathematica* greatly helped.

A distinguished nineteenth-century atheist, Charles Bradlaugh, deserves the honor of making this point: “It is certainly a clear gain to astronomical science,” Bradlaugh writes in an essay, “that the church which tried to compel Galileo to unsay the truth has been overborne by the growing unbelief of the age, even though our little children are yet taught that Joshua made the sun . . . stand still.”

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