OVERVIEW

Pushing back against reports that the United States has halted certain components of its counterterrorism mission in Yemen, the Pentagon said both "unilateral and partnered" operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula "are not suspended," according to the *Guardian*. On Africa, the *New York Times* reported that strained relations between the U.S. and Nigerian militaries have led the Pentagon to often bypass working with the Nigerians altogether, choosing to work instead with security officials in Chad, Cameroon and Niger in the fight against Boko Haram. Also of note, a new ISIL video purports to show Japanese hostage Haruna Yukawa beheaded, an act condemned by President Obama as a "brutal murder."

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0500

- Obama begins landmark visit to India
- Kerry heads to Nigeria amid tensions over polls, Boko Haram
- Russia blocks UN condemnation of shelling of Ukraine city
- Yemen parliament postpones meeting on president resignation
- Blizzard-like conditions possible in Northeast's next storm
- No bombs found on planes in Atlanta after threat

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Al Arabiya*: Libya's Ansar al-Sharia group confirms chief's death
- *Haaretz*: Ex-U.S. general blasts Netanyahu's planned Congress address
- *Khaama Press*: Truck bombing in Kabul wounds two civilians

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1942 – Thailand, a Japanese puppet state, declares war on the United States and Britain

Table of Contents

TOP STORIES

3. **Video Appears to Show Decapitated Body of a Japanese Hostage of ISIS**

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A11 | Martin Fackler

Japan's prime minister expressed outrage on Sunday at an image released Saturday that appeared to show the decapitated body of one of two Japanese hostages captured by Islamic State militants, and President Obama condemned what he called a "brutal murder."

MIDEAST

4. **Experts See Signs of Moderation Despite Houthis' Harsh Slogans**

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A9 | Rod Nordland and Eric Schmitt

At first glance the official slogan and emblem of the Houthis, who are now the dominant force in Yemen, does not offer much hope to American policy makers. It includes the words "Death to America, death to Israel, damnation to the Jews." But for all their harsh sloganeering, the Houthis may be a lot more moderate than it suggests, according to many diplomats and analysts who have followed them closely. They say it would be premature to dismiss them as Yemen's Hezbollah, despite their alliance with Iran.

5. **U.S.-Saudi bond tested in a time of instability**

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A1 | Steven Mufson and Liz Sly

In the late 1980s, a U.S. diplomat in Riyadh went to ask a small favor from then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, who replied: A friend who doesn't help you is no better than an enemy who does you no harm. Now the United States and Saudi Arabia need each other's help as much as ever, as the Middle East shudders from instability that stretches from Syria to Iraq to Yemen, spawning terrorist threats as well as threats to the legacy of American intervention in Iraq and the Saudi leadership role in the Arab world.

6. **With Qatar, it's complicated**

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A4 | Laura King

Even in a part of the world where tangled alliances are as common as sweet tea, one would be hard-pressed to find a country where the same few sweltering square miles house the sprawling operations hub for a huge U.S.-led air war and provide plush sanctuary to the likes of the Taliban and Hamas, both deemed terrorist groups by Washington.

7. **'There is no right to insult Islam'**

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. B1 | Lally Weymouth

In a hotel room in Davos, Switzerland, this past week, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu talked about the differences between his country and the United States over how to handle Syria and the Islamic State. Both nations agree that the two crises demand urgent action, but they part ways on priorities and tactics. They almost reached an agreement in December, but the deal fell apart. Davutoglu talked to The Washington Post about what happens next. Edited excerpts follow.

IRAQ/SYRIA

8. **Coalition air raids back up Kurdish advance in Iraq – US**

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 24 | Dan De Luce

US-led forces have carried out dozens of air strikes in Iraq to back up Kurdish forces advancing against Islamic State jihadists near the strategic city of Mosul, the American military said Saturday.

9. Kurdish forces fire into Islamic State-controlled Mosul

Reuters, Jan. 24 | Isabel Coles

Kurdish forces have fired rockets into Mosul for the first time since Islamic State militants overran the northern Iraqi city last summer, Kurdish military sources said on Saturday.

10. Sacred texts and the sword: Inside Isis training camps

The Observer (UK), Jan. 25, Pg. 30 | Hassan Hassan

Little is known about what goes on inside training camps run by Isis in areas under its control in Iraq and Syria - particularly its religious component. The Isis ideology is generally viewed as identical to al-Qaida's or the Saudi version of Salafism - adherence to fundamental Islamic tenets - and so there does not seem to be a serious effort to study it more closely. There is also a tendency to play down the role of religious ideology as a recruitment tool, since the motives of many Isis members have little to do with religion.

AFRICA

11. Nigerian troops fight Boko Haram in Maiduguri – military, vigilantes, locals

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 25 | Not Attributed

Nigerian troops on Sunday engaged Boko Haram fighters in a fierce battle in the restive northeastern city of Maiduguri, the military, vigilantes and residents said.

12. Africa's Islamic State

The Economist, Jan. 24, Pg. 44 | Not Attributed

Deflecting blame is a skill prized by politicians the world over. Many could, however, still learn a thing or two from Goodluck Jonathan, the president of Nigeria, who has found no end of scapegoats for Boko Haram, a vicious insurgent group in the north-east of Africa's most populous country. Mr Jonathan's most common evasion is that Boko Haram is a regional problem that cannot be solved by Nigeria alone. His excuses seem, unfortunately, to be metamorphosing into fact.

UKRAINE/RUSSIA

13. Rebels push toward Ukrainian port city

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A18 | Karoun Demirjian

The key port city of Mariupol became the latest flash point of rapidly intensifying hostilities in eastern Ukraine on Saturday, as a barrage of rocket fire struck the area, killing dozens of civilians, and pro-Russian rebels announced a push toward the strategic coastal city that serves as Ukraine's last bastion of control in the region.

14. Russian troops support rebel offensive in Ukraine, NATO says

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Adrian Croft

NATO said on Saturday that Russian troops were supporting a rebel offensive in eastern Ukraine with sophisticated missiles, rockets and drones and demanded Moscow halt its support.

EUROPE

15. Belgium Confronts the Jihadist Danger Within

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A6 | Andrew Higgins

Despite the attention focused on France since the attacks in and around Paris that killed 17 people, the proportion of young people who have left for jihad from Belgium has confronted the authorities here with an outsize domestic security threat that rivals that of its neighbor.

16. Army chief takes axe to 'bloated' top brass

The Times (UK), Jan. 24, Pg. 1 | Deborah Haynes

Army top brass will be reduced by up to a third under the most significant reform of senior command in a century, The Times can reveal. Plans by General Sir Nicholas Carter, the new head of the army, to make the force more professional and reduce bloated bureaucracy mean that many of Britain's 500 colonels and 200 brigadiers and generals will be cut. The move will ensure that the army, which is shrinking to 82,000 from 102,000 five years ago, is less top-heavy, like its United States counterpart. The 500,000-strong US army has about 310 officers ranked brigadier-general and above.

ASIA/PACIFIC

17. Obama heads to India to revive Asia 'pivot' policy

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A3 | Christi Parsons and Shashank Bengali

Just two months after his last trip to Asia, President Obama left Saturday for a three-day visit to India that includes no world summits, no major decisions to make and a relaxed schedule designed mainly to give plenty of chances for dinner and conversation with the country's popular new prime minister. The India itinerary, unusual for the normally frenetic White House, is meant to drive home a message about Obama's intentions for his foreign policy in the last two years of his presidency: His repeatedly delayed "pivot to Asia," a reorientation of policy priorities and military and diplomatic interests, is finally happening.

CONGRESS

18. Atop perch, McCain primed to push hawkish plan

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A7 | Missy Ryan

In May 2013, Sen. John McCain caused a stir when he took the risky step of venturing briefly into war-torn Syria to meet with opposition leaders whom he and many other Western backers considered the best hope for toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Nearly two years later, 12 of the 15 Syrian commanders McCain met on the trip are dead, proof in the senator's eyes of President Obama's failed approach to the conflict spreading across the Middle East. Now, as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain has the chance to amplify his critique of Obama's handling of Iraq and Syria and, by doing so, test the panel's influence over military policy and operations.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

19. Closing Gitmo 'Going To Be Very Difficult,' Hagel Says

NPR.org (Power Centers), Jan. 24 | Arnie Seipel and Steve Inskeep

President Obama wants to close the prison at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay before leaving office. But his departing defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, told NPR News the job is "going to be very difficult" to complete in that time. Hagel made that remark in an exit interview Friday, one of only a handful he granted as he prepared to vacate his expansive office at the Pentagon. The interview will air Monday on Morning Edition.

20. High-value Guantanamo detainees call home for first time in nearly a decade

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A5 | Julie Tate and Missy Ryan

For almost a decade, the 15 detainees considered to be the most dangerous at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been locked in a special top-security facility, deprived of some of the privileges granted to other prisoners, such as communal living, live television and periodic calls with their families. Now, as the Pentagon moves to improve prisoner conditions, officials have allowed several "high-value" inmates to make Skype-like video calls and speak with their families for the first time since they were brought to Guantanamo Bay from secret CIA prisons overseas.

MARINE CORPS

21. Marines to kick off month-long exercise with Japan

MarineCorpsTimes.com, Jan. 24 | Joshua Stewart

On Monday, Marines will begin a month-long exercise in Southern California with Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force. The event is designed to test Japan's command and control capabilities while improving one of the strongest military relationships in the Pacific.

TRANSCOM

22. Anti-Ebola module is unveiled

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Jan. 24, Pg. A1 | Nancy Cambria

On Friday, the U.S. Department of Defense announced a locally developed containment system at Scott Air Force Base to help military personnel safely airlift multiple patients with both airborne and fluid-borne diseases to U.S. hospitals. Gen. Paul Selva, commander of the U.S. Transportation Command Unit, or USTRANSCOM, said the system would increase the military's continued success at reducing fatalities in the field by better enabling infected military and aid workers to get to appropriate hospitals.

VETERANS

23. River Rats, still healing, gather in Vegas near 40th anniversary of Vietnam War

Las Vegas Review-Journal, Jan. 25, Pg. A1 | Keith Rogers

They huddled at a Las Vegas resort to reflect on what their minds can't erase nearly 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War. About 25 River Rats — men who wore black berets in the brown-water Navy and fired machine guns from fast-moving boats and low-flying helicopters over the Mekong River delta — reunited last week for the 12th time since the war ended April 30, 1975.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

24. Shifting Realities in Syria

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. SR12 | Editorial

As recently as October, Secretary of State John Kerry argued that there will never be peace in Syria as long as President Bashar al-Assad "remains the focus of power" there. Even now, American officials continue to insist that any lasting political solution will require Mr. Assad's exit. But the unsettling truth is that the brutal dictator is still clinging to power and the United States and its allies are going to have to live with him, at least for now.

25. The Syria conundrum

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A26 | Doyle McManus

In 2011, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, a mild-mannered diplomat named Robert S. Ford, became the face of American support for the Arab Spring when he boldly visited opponents to the brutal regime of Bashar Assad in the northern city of Hama. In 2014, Ford quit, saying he could not defend the Obama administration's inconstant support for Syrian rebels. "More hesitation ... [will] simply hasten the day when American forces have to intervene against Al Qaeda in Syria," he warned. Now, a year later, Ford's warning has come true.

26. To stop the terrorists, take away their hope

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A21 | Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales (Ret.)

The centerpiece of a national security strategy is to isolate and exploit an enemy's vulnerable "center of gravity." Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian military philosopher and father of modern military theory, defined center of gravity as "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act." Conventional wisdom inside the Pentagon and among defense intellectuals is that the vulnerable center of gravity of today's enemy is its extreme Islamist ideology.

27. Prisoners of the Saudis

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. SR13 | Ross Douthat

The Western response to the death of Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, king of Saudi Arabia and custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, followed two paths. Along one, various officials and luminaries offered the gestures -- half-mast flags, public obsequies -- expected when a great statesman enters the hereafter. Along the other path, anyone outside Western officialdom was free to tell the fuller truth: that Abdullah presided over one of the world's most wicked nonpariah states, whose domestic policies are almost cartoonishly repressive and whose international influence has been strikingly malign.

28. Nuclear insecurity

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A22 | Editorial

Near the Russian city of Ozersk, about 80 miles south of Yekaterinburg, stands a warehouse like no other. The Fissile Material Storage Facility, with walls 23 feet thick, is a hanger-sized vault to protect fissile materials - highly enriched uranium and plutonium - that could be used for nuclear weapons. The facility was built at a cost of $309 million by the United States in a period of cooperation with Russia to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons materials. Today, that period is ending.

29. A nuclear rift worth fixing

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A23 | Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar

For more than two decades, the United States and Russia partnered to secure and eliminate dangerous nuclear materials - not as a favor to one another but as a common-sense commitment, born of mutual self-interest, to prevent catastrophic nuclear terrorism. The world's two largest nuclear powers repeatedly set aside their political differences to cooperate on nuclear security to ensure that terrorists would not be able to detonate a nuclear bomb in New York, Moscow, Paris, Tel Aviv or elsewhere. Unfortunately, this common-sense cooperation has become the latest casualty of the spiraling crisis in relations among the United States, Europe and Russia.

30. We'd be better off without West Point

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. B1 | Scott Beauchamp

The service academies - the U.S. Military Academy for the Army (West Point), the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy - promise to educate and mold future officers charged with leading the enlisted members of the military. But they are not the hallowed arbiters of quality promised by their myths. Their traditions mask bloated government money-sucks that consistently underperform. They are centers of nepotism that turn below-average students into average officers. They are indulgences that taxpayers, who fund them, can no longer afford. They've outlived their use, and it's time to shut them down.

TOP STORIES

1. United States says drone strikes in Yemen continue despite Houthi coup

Pentagon also says counterterrorism operations continue in country; Reports had said efforts against al-Qaida affiliate were on hold

The Guardian Online (UK), Jan. 24 | Spencer Ackerman

NEW YORK -- The Pentagon and the White House are pushing back on reports that the Obama administration is pausing drone strikes and other counterterrorism operations in Yemen, amidst the abrupt collapse of a critical partner government.

Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said both "unilateral and partnered" operations conducted by the US in Yemen against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) "are not suspended".

Continuing "partnered" strikes with the Yemenis provides a signal that the US still considers itself to have reliable allies on the ground to spot for drone strikes and aid in other attacks on an al-Qaida affiliate observers fear will capitalize on the unfolding unrest in the country.

Alistair Baskey, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said reports that counterterrorism in Yemen was on hold were "completely false".

"As we have in the past, we will continue to take action to disrupt continuing, imminent threats to the United States and our citizens. We also continue to partner with Yemeni security forces in this effort," Baskey said.

But as Houthi rebels marching on the capital of Sanaa have upended Yemeni politics and created uncertainty about continued cooperation with the US, Kirby said the military had "temporarily put on hold some training with the Yemenis".

US Central Command, which oversees training for partner Middle Eastern military forces, declined to provide additional detail.

The resignation this week of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, whom the Obama administration had cultivated to permit drone strikes, has left many in US security circles wondering if a post-Hadi government will prove as acquiescent.

Under Hadi and his predecessor, the similarly deposed long-time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Yemeni government provided a launchpad for US attacks against al-Qaida's local affiliate in return for hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid, military equipment and training, and unequivocal diplomatic support.

A tally kept by the New America Foundation cited 19 drone strikes in 2014, down from a peak of 47 in 2012. US counterterrorism officials consider AQAP to be the terrorist network's most potent affiliate, though its attempts to attack the mainland US have yet to succeed.

Both the Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA conduct separate drone operations in Yemen. The elite US forces have also sponsored their Yemeni counterparts, a relationship meant both to ease the counterterrorism burden on the US and to provide a durable tie to "deep state" security services in the event of political instability of the sort on display this past week.

Another insurance policy for US counterterrorism in Yemen is an airbase in Saudi Arabia, Yemen's northern neighbor, which the CIA uses to launch drone strikes. The CIA declined comment about the impact of the Yemeni government collapse on its missions.

Anonymous US officials cited by the Washington Post said late on Friday that the US had lost its ability to work with Yemeni security services now under Houthi control, prompting what one called a "breather" in US strikes that would benefit al-Qaida.

It is unclear if military equipment provided by the US, from helicopters to communications gear, has fallen into anti-American hands, as happened earlier this year when Islamic State (Isis) militants overran Iraqi military positions. Several US military officials have declined to address whether the US even has knowledge of the fate of the weapons and other material it has for years provided to Yemen.

Reports from Yemen on Saturday indicated that local instability is continuing. Thousands reportedly took to the streets in Sanaa, demonstrating against the Houthi "coup" and chanting slogans denouncing al-Qaida. The Houthis are enemies of al-Qaida but not necessarily hospitable to the US.

An official quoted by the Washington Post said the US would be open to a counterterrorism dialogue with the Houthi leadership.

RETURN TO TOP

2. Rifts Between U.S. and Nigeria Impeding Fight Against Boko Haram

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A13 | Helene Cooper

WASHINGTON -- Relations between American military trainers and specialists advising the Nigerian military in the fight against Boko Haram are so strained that the Pentagon often bypasses the Nigerians altogether, choosing to work instead with security officials in the neighboring countries of Chad, Cameroon and Niger, according to defense officials and diplomats.

Major rifts like these between the Nigerian and American militaries have been hampering the fight against Boko Haram militants as they charge through northern Nigeria, razing villages, abducting children and forcing tens of thousands of people to flee.

Secretary of State John Kerry is scheduled to travel to Nigeria on Sunday to meet with the candidates in Nigeria's presidential elections, and the Pentagon says that the Nigerian Army is still an important ally in the region -- vital to checking Boko Haram before it transforms into a larger, and possibly more transnational, threat.

"In some respects, they look like ISIL two years ago," Michael G. Vickers, the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, told the Atlantic Council last week, using another name for the militant group known as the Islamic State. "How fast their trajectory can go up is something we're paying a lot of attention to. But certainly in their area, they're wreaking a lot of destruction."

But American officials are wary of the Nigerian military as well, citing corruption and sweeping human rights abuses by its soldiers. American officials are hesitant to share intelligence with the Nigerian military because they contend it has been infiltrated by Boko Haram, an accusation that has prompted indignation from Nigeria.

"We don't have a foundation for what I would call a good partnership right now," said a senior military official with the United States Africa Command, or Africom, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. "We want a relationship based on trust, but you have to be able to see yourself. And they're in denial."

The United States was so concerned about Boko Haram infiltration that American officials have not included raw data in intelligence they have provided Nigeria, worried that their sources would be compromised.

In retaliation, Nigeria in December canceled the last stage of American training of a newly created Nigerian Army battalion. There has been no resumption of the training since then.

Some Nigerian officials expressed dismay that relations between the two militaries have frayed to this point.

"For a small country like Chad, or Cameroon, to come to assist" the Americans, "that is disappointing," said Ahmed Zanna, a senator from Nigeria's north. "You have a very good and reliable ally, and you are running away from them," he said, faulting the Nigerian government. "It is terrible. I pray for a change of government."

The tensions have been mounting for years. In their battle against Boko Haram, Nigerian troops have rounded up and killed young men in northern cities indiscriminately, rampaged through neighborhoods and, according to witnesses and local officials, killed scores of civilians in a retaliatory massacre in a village in 2013.

Refugees said the soldiers set fire to homes, shot residents and caused panicked people to flee into the waters of Lake Chad, where some drowned.

Last summer, the United States blocked the sale of American-made Cobra attack helicopters to Nigeria from Israel, amid concerns about Nigeria's protection of civilians when conducting military operations. That further angered the Nigerian government, and Nigeria's ambassador to the United States responded sharply, accusing Washington of hampering the effort.

"The kind of question that we have to ask is, let's say we give certain kinds of equipment to the Nigerian military that is then used in a way that affects the human situation," James F. Entwistle, the American ambassador to Nigeria, told reporters in October, explaining the decision to block the helicopter sale. "If I approve that, I'm responsible for that. We take that responsibility very seriously."

All the while, Boko Haram has continued its ruthless push through Nigeria, bombing schools and markets, torching thousands of buildings and homes, and kidnapping hundreds of people.

Now stretching into its sixth year, the militant group's insurgency has left thousands of people dead, the overwhelming majority of them civilians. It killed an estimated 2,000 civilians in the first six months of 2014 alone, Human Rights Watch said, and many of Nigeria's major cities -- Abuja, Kano, Kaduna -- have been bombed.

American officials say that while it is unclear exactly how much territory Boko Haram effectively controls in Nigeria, the group is, at the very least, conducting attacks across almost 20 percent of the country.

"They reportedly control a majority of the territory of Borno State," in northeastern Nigeria, "and a significant portion of the border areas with Cameroon and Chad," said Lauren Ploch Blanchard, a specialist in African Affairs with the Congressional Research Service.

Even before the Nigerians canceled the training program in December, American military officials were stewing when soldiers showed up without proper equipment. Given the nation's oil wealth, the Americans attributed the deficits to chronic corruption on the part of Nigerian commanders, saying that they had pocketed the money meant for their soldiers.

"It's not like they don't have the money," the senior Africom official said. "There are some things that we require to be good partners. The first of which is a commitment on the part of the Nigerian government to support its own army. They have a responsibility to provide adequate pay, to take care of their people, and to equip them."

"None of those empty allegations have ever been proved," said Chris Olukolade, a spokesman for the Nigerian military. "The Nigerian military has always been receptive of honest support or assistance from well-meaning friends or partners. No one should however seek to use this security situation to usurp our sovereignty as a nation."After Boko Haram made international headlines last April by kidnapping more than 200 schoolgirls, the United States flew several hundred surveillance drone flights over the northeast to search for the girls, but those missions were unsuccessful. When the Pentagon did come up with leads, American military officials said, and turned that information over to Nigerian commanders to pursue, they did nothing with it.

The frustrations between the two sides has broad implications for the fight against Boko Haram, officials said, including making it harder for other international partners who have joined the effort. "We are trying to work

closely with the French and the Americans in support of the Nigerian military and government against Boko Haram," a senior British diplomat said. "A rift between one of our two partners and the Nigerians is not a good thing."

--Adam Nossiter contributed reporting from Maiduguri, Nigeria

RETURN TO TOP

3. Video Appears to Show Decapitated Body of a Japanese Hostage of ISIS
New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A11 | Martin Fackler

TOKYO -- Japan's prime minister expressed outrage on Sunday at an image released Saturday that appeared to show the decapitated body of one of two Japanese hostages captured by Islamic State militants, and President Obama condemned what he called a "brutal murder."

The kidnappers had threatened to kill the men if a Friday deadline passed for a $200 million ransom from Japan. On Saturday, a video appeared in which one of the hostages, Kenji Goto, a 47-year-old journalist, was shown holding a photo of what appeared to be the decapitated body of the other hostage, Haruna Yukawa, 42, an adventurer.

The prime minister, Shinzo Abe, said that while experts were still analyzing the photo, it had "a high chance of being real." Speaking on a television debate show, Mr. Abe condemned the apparent killing of Mr. Yukawa as an "outrageous and unforgivable act of violence," and demanded the immediate release of Mr. Goto.

The United States and Japanese governments have been scrambling to authenticate the video containing the image, and an accompanying audio of what purports to be Mr. Goto's voice conveying a new demand by his captors. SITE Intelligence, an organization that tracks jihadist propaganda, said that it believed the image of Mr. Yukawa's dead body was authentic. But Al Furqan, a media arm of the Islamic State that has in the past posted videos of the group's beheadings, had not released anything confirming the apparent killing. A statement by SITE said the video was posted on Twitter accounts linked to the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

The audio message accompanying the video said the Islamic State no longer demanded ransom for the second Japanese hostage, but instead offered to free him in exchange for the release of a woman facing the death penalty in Jordan for her role in a deadly 2005 bombing there. Mr. Obama, who was traveling to India, issued a statement saying that the "United States strongly condemns the brutal murder of Japanese citizen Haruna Yukawa by the terrorist group ISIL."

American officials also appear close to concluding the video was real. Brian Hale, a spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said in an email Saturday night that "the U.S. intelligence community has no reason to doubt the authenticity of the video."

If the video is authentic, then the other hostage, Mr. Goto, remains alive, and is still being used by the Islamic State as a bargaining chip. Mr. Yukawa, a self-described military contractor who was captured in Syria in August, would be the first Japanese person to be killed by the Islamic State, which has established a self-proclaimed caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq financed partly by ransom payments for kidnapped foreigners.

The SITE statement said a still image of Mr. Goto in shackles shows him holding a photo of a beheaded man, which it said was Mr. Yukawa. The video that included the still image was removed from YouTube early Saturday.

The Islamic State has beheaded three Americans and two Britons in recent months, and showcased the killings via Internet video postings.

The Japanese men's fate has become a fixation in Japan in recent days and a challenge for Mr. Abe. Political analysts have said the killing might turn Japan's still pacifist public against Mr. Abe's efforts to give the nation a more active role in global affairs. The size of the ransom demand for the two hostages matched the amount of aid that Mr. Abe recently pledged to help with refugee relief and other nonlethal efforts by Middle East nations to deal with the Islamic State.

As he let the ransom deadline pass, apparently without paying the money, Mr. Abe had vowed that Japan would not be intimidated. After the image of the corpse appeared, a grim-faced Mr. Abe rushed to the prime minister's office to oversee this latest twist to the hostage crisis that began Tuesday, when a video posted online showed the hostages kneeling as a knife-wielding militant threatened to kill them.

Mr. Abe held an emergency meeting of his ministers overnight during which he said he directed them to use every possible avenue to free Mr. Goto.

"I feel strong outrage," Mr. Abe told reporters after the meeting. "The Japanese government will not give in to terrorism and will continue to contribute to the peace and stability of the international community and the world."

In the three-minute audio recording released Saturday, the voice of a man who claimed to be Mr. Goto said Mr. Yukawa had been "slaughtered" and blamed Mr. Abe's failure to pay the ransom. (In the audio, the voice says he is Kenji Goto Jogo; it remained unclear late Saturday why that was different from the name given by the Japanese government and his own website.)

The audio is addressed to Mr. Goto's wife, telling her that the Islamic State was now demanding the release of the woman imprisoned in Jordan, Sajida Mubarak al-Rishawi.

"They no longer want money," the voice says in accented English. "You bring them their sister from the Jordanian regime, and I will be released immediately. Me for her. Don't let these be my last words you ever hear. Don't let Abe also kill me."

The devastating attack in Jordan in November 2005 -- a triple bombing of hotels in Jordan's capital, Amman -- killed dozens of people and is referred to there as Jordan's 9/11. Ms. Rishawi's husband blew himself up in a wedding hall, but her suicide belt failed to detonate.

Ms. Rishawi is Iraqi, and her family comes from a tribe in Anbar Province, where in 2005 Al Qaeda in Iraq was entrenched and where the Islamic State now holds sway. Still, as a low-level operator and a failure at her mission, Ms. Rishawi seemed an odd choice for the Islamists' focus, since Jordan is holding far more important extremist prisoners.

The release of the video came after Mr. Goto's mother, Junko Ishido, issued a plea at a Tokyo news conference Friday to the kidnappers, beseeching them to spare his life and asserting that he was not an enemy of Islam.

On Saturday, Japanese officials said they still had not reached the kidnappers or confirmed their location despite days of what they described as frantic efforts to do so. Japanese officials never specified whether they were willing

to pay any ransom to the Islamic State. Japan paid to free kidnapped citizens in at least one previous case, in 1999, spending $3 million to secure the release of four mining experts held in Kyrgyzstan.

"This action is an unforgivable act of violence that leaves us at a loss for words, and we condemn it," said the top Japanese government spokesman, Yoshihide Suga. "We strongly urge that the remaining hostage, Mr. Goto, not be harmed and be immediately released."

As hope that the hostages would be freed alive has dwindled, Mr. Abe has faced criticism for embroiling Japan in a conflict of little direct import to his nation. On the whole, however, the debate has been relatively muted, as the nation anxiously awaited the fate of the hostages.

Amateur videos have appeared online calling for the release of the hostages. Some show people holding up signs saying, "I am Kenji," echoing the "I am Charlie" rallying cry that spread in France after the recent terrorist attack on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. Mr. Goto is a freelance journalist with experience covering wars and humanitarian crises whose photos have appeared on the front pages of many Japanese newspapers. He vanished in late October, after reportedly going into Syria to seek the release of Mr. Yukawa.

--Reporting was contributed by Rod Nordland from Amman, Jordan; Anne Barnard, Mohammad Ghannam and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Lebanon; Rukmini Callimachi from San Diego; Hisako Ueno from Tokyo; Eric Schmitt from Washington; and Emma G. Fitzsimmons and Rick Gladstone from New York

RETURN TO TOP

MIDEAST

4. Experts See Signs of Moderation Despite Houthis' Harsh Slogans

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A9 | Rod Nordland and Eric Schmitt

AMMAN, Jordan -- At first glance the official slogan and emblem of the Houthis, who are now the dominant force in Yemen, does not offer much hope to American policy makers.

It includes the words "Death to America, death to Israel, damnation to the Jews." Houthis shout it when they march, wear it on arm patches, paint it on buildings and stick it onto their car windows. When pictured, those words are rendered in red, framed by "God is great" and "Victory to Islam" in green, on a white background.

Sometimes the red words are shown dripping blood.

But for all their harsh sloganeering, the Houthis may be a lot more moderate than it suggests, according to many diplomats and analysts who have followed them closely. They say it would be premature to dismiss them as Yemen's Hezbollah, despite their alliance with Iran.

While Obama administration officials in Washington insisted that counterterrorism operations in Yemen against Al Qaeda, including armed drone flights, would continue despite the Houthi takeover, there were indications that given the political turmoil some specific missions and training might be suspended, reduced or altered on a case-by-case basis.

"The capability is all still there, we're just picking and choosing now," said one senior United States official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of diplomatic sensitivities.

On Wednesday, Michael G. Vickers, the Pentagon's top intelligence policy official, noted that the Houthis' dominance had been growing over the past several months as they expanded their control since last September, but he said that has not interfered with American missions. "The Houthis are anti-Al Qaeda, and we've been able to continue some of our counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda in the past couple months," Mr. Vickers said.

That optimism is remarkable considering that one of the Houthis' key campaign points has been opposition to the United States' use of drones in Yemen against Al Qaeda, a policy that had received the enthusiastic cooperation of the pro-American president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who resigned on Thursday in protest against Houthi pressure on his government.

Whether American policy makers will be able to continue their hunt for Al Qaeda in Yemen is an important issue, as the group's local franchise, along with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, poses the biggest terrorist threat to the United States, and it took responsibility for the attack this month in Paris on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo.

The Houthis are also believed to get financing from Iran, and concern about that led Saudi Arabia last year to cut off $4 billion in funding to the Yemeni government when the Houthis became part of it. The Houthis are dominated by the Zaydis, who are members of a sect that is an offshoot of Shiite Islam, the religion of Iran.

That has made the Houthis bitter opponents of Al Qaeda, who consider all Shiite Muslims to be apostates -- as do many Saudis. Since most Yemenis are Sunni Muslims, Al Qaeda has been able to capitalize on the Houthi rise to win more supporters who are worried about Houthi dominance.

The Houthis have denied that they receive any Iranian financing, and they have also taken pains to play down their country's sectarian differences, as well as bringing in supporters who are not from the Zaydi minority.

"The Houthis are not Hezbollah," said Charles Schmitz, an expert on the group and a professor at Towson University, referring to the Iranian-supported group that dominates Lebanon and is actively fighting on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. "They are domestic, homegrown, and have very deep roots in Yemen, going back thousands of years."

Mr. Schmitz continued: "Last year they became the dominant military and national power, and there's no doubt that was the result of Iranian support, not through weapons, which they take from the Yemeni military, but the key thing is the funding. The Houthis have the money, and it's got to be coming from the Iranians. Does that mean they are going to do Iranian bidding? I don't think so."

April Alley, a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group in Sana, said: "Theoretically there is quite a bit of common ground in Yemen between the Houthis and the U.S., particularly when it comes to security issues and Al Qaeda. But so far it's not been enough to overcome the obstacles. The Houthis have their own limits in which they can engage the Americans given the political narrative they have propagated."

Israeli analysts have viewed the rise of the Houthis with concern, worrying that a pro-Iranian government in Sana could disrupt shipping lanes through the Red Sea, a vital passageway for Israel. "The fact that an ally of Iran

basically now controls another Arab capital is of great concern to Israel," said Jonathan Spyer, an Israeli international affairs analyst.

But even some Israelis had a mixed reaction to the Houthi rise. "Sometimes we're in a position that we don't know what works for us better," said Giora Eiland, a former Israeli national security adviser. "Any increase of the Iranian influence is bad for Israel. On the other hand, they are fighting organizations that are associated with Al Qaeda."

American officials had already reduced staffing at the embassy in Sana after the Houthis joined the government last year; that staffing is now going down to only a handful of diplomats, officials said. Only last Monday, for instance, an American Embassy vehicle was fired on by Houthi gunmen at a Houthi checkpoint in Sana; it was armored and no one was hurt. And as recently as Thursday, the Houthis organized a group of their militants to march through Sana, shouting their usual anti-American slogan.

Christopher Stevens, an expert on international relations at Misericordia University in Pennsylvania, said too much attention had been focused on the Houthis' opposition to drone strikes. "Instead of condemning them, let's work closely to try to forge a stable government to fight the common enemy," he said. "Maybe this is the time we move in to provide them the aid to do more on the ground and let them do it. At the end of the day defeating Al Qaeda has to be done by the people of the Middle East; this Whack-a-Mole approach is not going to work anyway."

There are still about 200 American military personnel in Yemen, including dozens of trainers as well as a small number of commandos who have been carrying out clandestine attacks against members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a senior American official said on Friday. The latest turmoil has not affected those troops or their mission, American officials said.

A senior American military official said the United States military has established informal communication links with its Houthi counterparts, and this week has been using those channels to ensure there are no accidental clashes between American and Houthi personnel.

There is evidence that within the Houthis' own ranks, a debate has been underway on how the group would relate to the United States if it took power. "We think that Yemen's relations with the United States should be in the cooperation framework, just like with any country," Ali Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi party's youth wing, said last year. "Our hostility is rather against U.S. policies that once are stopped, ours will stop, too."

Mr. Bukhaiti, however, resigned last week from the Houthis' organization in protest of the movement's actions leading to Mr. Hadi's resignation.

Last November, another progressive Houthi leader, Ali al-Emad, raised eyebrows when he made a rare visit to the United States. Addressing the Atlantic Council in Washington, he hardly seemed to be projecting moderation. The Houthi movement, he said, "welcomes international condemnation, as it confirms the group's firmly Yemeni status."

--Rod Nordland reported from Amman, and Eric Schmitt from Washington. Reporting was contributed by Mona El-Naggar and Shuaib Almosawa from Sana, Yemen; Kareem Fahim from Baghdad; and Jodi Rudoren from Jerusalem

RETURN TO TOP

5. U.S.-Saudi bond tested in a time of instability

Obama to visit Riyadh in detour; President will seek to firm up ties with new king

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A1 | Steven Mufson and Liz Sly

In the late 1980s, a U.S. diplomat in Riyadh went to ask a small favor from then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, who replied: A friend who doesn't help you is no better than an enemy who does you no harm.

Now the United States and Saudi Arabia need each other's help as much as ever, as the Middle East shudders from instability that stretches from Syria to Iraq to Yemen, spawning terrorist threats as well as threats to the legacy of American intervention in Iraq and the Saudi leadership role in the Arab world.

President Obama, who was to arrive in India on Sunday morning to attend Republic Day celebrations, will drop plans to visit the Taj Mahal and make a detour Tuesday to Riyadh. There he will pay his respects to the late King Abdullah, who died Thursday, and firm up ties to the new king, Salman bin Abdul Aziz, who inherits this slate of problems along with his crown.

"As a leader, he was always candid and had the courage of his convictions," Obama said of Abdullah in a statement Friday. "One of those convictions was his steadfast and passionate belief in the importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship as a force for stability and security in the Middle East and beyond."

For much of the Obama presidency, however, Saudi Arabia has wondered whether the United States had fallen into the category of an unhelpful friend, and it has doubted U.S. commitment to the region.

Diplomats say that King Abdullah had been angry in recent years at Obama's failure to topple Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and that he was disappointed with the lack of U.S. pressure for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement and anxious about whether U.S.-led nuclear talks with Iran would lead to a rapprochement between the United States and Saudi Arabia's main rival.

But U.S. officials say that over the past few months, ties between Washington and Riyadh have warmed again, bolstered by an Obama visit to the Saudi capital last March and, more importantly, by both countries' overriding focus on blunting the rise of the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS.

"The relationship is on a sound track," said a senior administration official. "I don't want to paint a picture of complete harmony. They want us to be more aggressive on Iran. They want us to be more aggressive in Syria," he said. But, he added, "I think on both sides there has been an evolution. I think the threat of ISIL has certainly brought the two countries together."

He said that the Saudis see the Islamic State as a direct threat to their internal stability and that during a December visit by Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the Saudi internal security chief, "there was no obvious difference of views" and "on issue after issue we have been able to agree on a way forward."

The stakes in the relationship are high. The United States needs help from Saudi Arabia, home of the extremist Wahhabi strain of Islam, in tracking down terrorists and choking off funding to militant jihadist groups. And as the world's largest crude oil exporter, Saudi Arabia's stability is critical for the world economy. Saudi Arabia, for its part, needs U.S. help to protect its vast oil infrastructure and shipping lanes for its oil tankers.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia is fending off threats now lapping at its borders, especially the rise of Shiite groups backed by Iran and the erosion of Saudi prestige as a leader of Sunnis throughout the Middle East, Saudis and Western observers say.

"The situation is urgent," said Abdullah al-Shammari, a political analyst in Riyadh. "Saudi Arabia needs to think about new alternatives and creative solutions. Otherwise, we will lose even more."

Recently, Saudi fighter jets have taken part in bombing raids against Islamic State forces, rare forays for a country that has long preferred to work behind the scenes. And the Saudi government has hunted down returning Islamic State warriors while preaching a more moderate brand of Islam to head off recruiting efforts by extremist groups.

"I think the Saudis have started to see ISIL and the jihadi blowback as increasingly threatening to them," said F. Gregory Gause, head of the international affairs department at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. "That has mitigated their enthusiasm for the Syrian revolt. Now much more attention is being paid to inoculating the home front and criminalizing those aiding the jihad."

The emergence of a new common foe, however, might not be the best way to rebuild a relationship, especially since the foe has emerged from Iraq. Abdullah had opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but when President George W. Bush asked him to let U.S. forces use northern Saudi Arabia as a staging area, Abdullah granted the favor.

Since then, say some former American diplomats, the relationship with the kingdom has changed, from one in which favors, mutual understanding and personal ties play important roles to one comprising a litany of case-by-case requests. In the space of a month, the Obama administration can host a leading Saudi prince, condemn a public lashing and then praise Saudi cooperation on fighting the Islamic State.

"Now everything is transactional," said Chas W. Freeman Jr., a veteran diplomat who was U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia under President George H.W. Bush. "The Saudis now ask: What's in it for us? Everything is one-off. There is a fundamental shift in the relationship."

That relationship dates to Feb. 14, 1945, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt met for five hours with King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud on the deck of a U.S. destroyer in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake to plot out a postwar order for the kingdom, where an American company had discovered oil in 1938.

By the 1970s, President Richard M. Nixon saw Saudi Arabia and Iran, then ruled by the shah, as "twin pillars" of regional stability and bulwarks against Soviet influence in the region during the Cold War. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the shah, President Jimmy Carter vowed to do whatever was necessary to protect Saudi Arabia and the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

The participation of Saudi citizens in the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, and the flow of Saudi charity money to groups such as al-Qaeda turned many Americans against the kingdom, but relations between the two governments remained strong, if often troubled.

For most of the Obama presidency, U.S.-Saudi relations have been marked by tension, having mostly to do with Obama's handling of the Syrian civil war.

Abdullah was angry that Obama didn't do more to overthrow Assad, or punish the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons in the conflict, or give guns to the Syrian rebel groups. Obama had called the use of chemical weapons a "red line."

"The irony is that the genuine, legitimate and moderate opposition - which Saudi Arabia would like to see supplied with defensive weapons . . . which the West continues to deny them - is now fighting both Assad's forces and their allies from Shia forces on one side and the so-called Sunni jihadists al-Qaeda fighters and other bloodthirsty irregulars on the other," Prince Turki al-Faisal said in a London speech in May last year. "This is a shameful situation and a dark blot on the moral standing of the world."

In an earlier speech, Turki had said that "public opinion in the kingdom, and I think in all of the Muslim world, is very much disappointed in the way that the United States has dealt with this issue, along with the Palestinian issue."

But the Obama administration doubted that arming the rebels would succeed, and it feared the extremism of some of the rebel groups. Many of the weapons others have supplied have found their way into the hands of the extremist Islamic State, which now controls territory along parts of Saudi Arabia's northern border.

Meanwhile, the more moderate groups in which Saudi Arabia invested most of its energies have suffered a string of defeats, and the Syrian Opposition Coalition has proved unable to present a meaningful political alternative to Assad. Earlier this month, Saudi-backed candidates lost to ones backed by Turkey in elections for positions in the opposition's leadership, further shrinking Saudi influence in Syria.

Abdullah also broke openly with the United States over Egypt, deploring the lack of U.S. support for the Mubarak regime. Later, when the Obama administration cut aid to Egypt, Saudi Arabia pledged to provide the lion's share of a $12 billion Persian Gulf aid package to help new Egyptian leader Gen. Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, who had ousted an elected Muslim Brotherhood government.

Obama's March 28 visit last year came amid these tensions. "It was less intended to accomplish something than to preclude bad things from happening," said Freeman, "and I think it worked on that level. There had been a whole series of Saudi statements criticizing the United States. That is not the Saudi style that we know. And it reflected genuine exasperation."

Saudi Arabia has also feared that a deal on Iran's nuclear program could lead to a warming of U.S. relations with its rival Iran and that prolonged negotiations might sap U.S. desire to confront Tehran as it expands its influence in Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Sanaa.

"They do raise the fact that we need to be more aggressive about countering Iran's threat in the region, and they wonder whether nuclear talks constrain our ability to counter Iran's efforts in region," the senior U.S. official said. "Our answer is no. We can compartmentalize talks. And a nuclear-armed Iran is more dangerous to Saudi Arabia than any agreement we might reach."

However, the collapse of the government in Yemen last week at the hands of groups backed by Iran will only heighten Saudi concerns about the stability of its southern border. The Iranian-backed Shiite Houthi movement now exercises de facto control over Saudi Arabia's southern neighbor, compounding a sense of encirclement that began with the empowerment of Iraq's Shiite majority after the U.S. invasion in 2003.

The Saudis "see another Hezbollah being created, but at their border," said Mustafa Alani, director of security and terrorism at the Geneva-based Gulf Research Center, referring to the Iran-backed movement in Lebanon. "They look to the northern border and see that Iraq is 100 percent in the hands of Iran, and they look to the southern border and see what may be an Iranian mini-state in Yemen."

In addition to the strategic threat posed by a hostile power on its doorstep, the Houthi ascent in Yemen has inflicted a psychological blow to Saudi Arabia's sense of prestige as the region's leading Sunni power and anointed guardian of Islam, said Shammari, the political analyst.

"Forget about the strategic importance - this is a Saudi, a Sunni and an Arab issue," he said. "Saudi Arabia is the sponsor of the Sunni world, and when Arabs see Houthis controlling Yemen, this destroys respect for Saudi Arabia." He added, "King Salman has to see this and act."

Opposed to Bush's decision to invade Iraq, Abdullah was also worried about Obama's decision to withdraw, which reinforced fears that the United States, flush with new oil supplies and talking about a foreign policy and military "pivot" to Asia, would abandon the Persian Gulf.

"I think we always tend to be a bit in crisis mode about the Saudis," Gause said. "This whole idea about America leaving the Middle East is an exaggeration but is very intensely felt in the gulf states because they rely on us for military protection."

Some regional experts have harsher assessments. "Saudi foreign policy is reactive, it's erratic and it's personality-driven, depending on the princes who hold portfolios," said Frederic Wehrey of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "It's all about bags of cash handed out to unreliable allies."

Where will U.S.-Saudi relations go after Abdullah? Though Abdullah introduced some progressive reforms in Saudi Arabia, the unequal treatment of women and suppression of dissent creates a certain distance from the United States. Human Rights Watch noted in August, the same month that American James Foley was beheaded by Islamic State militants, that 19 people were beheaded in Saudi Arabia, eight of them for nonviolent offenses such as drug smuggling.

Salman, who had served as defense minister since 2011, has pledged continuity. Reputed to be more conservative on religious matters, he isn't likely to introduce sweeping changes.

But the cultural gap is narrowing. Many members of the next generation of Saudi leaders studied in the United States, where there are currently about 54,000 Saudis studying. Gause said that the new generation "learned at their fathers' knees that America was their big relationship."

Gause added that "the old Cold War solidarity" has disappeared, but he said that "interests will keep the two states together."

--Sly reported from Beirut. Hugh Naylor in Beirut contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

6. With Qatar, it's complicated

The emirate's ties to militants encumber relationships with neighbors and the U.S.

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A4 | Laura King

Even in a part of the world where tangled alliances are as common as sweet tea, one would be hard-pressed to find a country where the same few sweltering square miles house the sprawling operations hub for a huge U.S.-led air war and provide plush sanctuary to the likes of the Taliban and Hamas, both deemed terrorist groups by Washington.

Perched on a tiny peninsula protruding into the Persian Gulf, Qatar is dwarfed by neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, but has displayed outsize foreign policy ambitions, with the ripple effects of its immense natural gas wealth being felt from the mosque minaret to the executive suite, and on battlegrounds from Libya to Syria and beyond.

The emirate's goal may have been to heighten its influence and prestige by extending a cordial hand to all, but falconry-loving Qatar has lately seen its wings clipped, facing bruising rebukes from its powerful neighbors and Egypt over its long-standing support of Islamist groups, some of them militant ones.

Qatari officials used to have a favorite phrase, that the emirate was punching above its weight. Now the watchwords may be more along the lines of quiet retrenchment.

Amid what had become a rapidly deepening diplomatic isolation in the region, Qatar has scrambled to get back in the good graces of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council and to mend fences with Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country and its traditional intellectual center.

The emirate has made symbolic steps such as the never formally acknowledged ejection of seven Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood figures, who departed in September for Turkey. It has also moved to stem the flow of funds from wealthy private donors to extremist militant groups, some via what had heretofore been lightly regulated charities.

Neighbors Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which had withdrawn their ambassadors in a highly public sign of strong displeasure, announced two months ago that they would send their envoys back.

Egyptian officials suggest that President Abdel Fattah Sisi, who was infuriated by Qatar's support for toppled Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, may soon be ready to resume high-level contacts. The likelihood of rapprochement increased recently after Qatar acceded to Cairo's demands to shut down the Brotherhood-boosting Egyptian arm of the emirate's flagship broadcaster, Al Jazeera, itself conceived as a projection of Qatari power and prestige, but whose influence has waned in recent years.

Despite conciliatory gestures, however, analysts say Qatar has not wavered in its core belief that political Islam -- the view that austere Muslim teachings should guide all aspects of society -- remains the prime long-term force in the region.

Qatar has faced Western pressure over material support it has provided for some radical factions battling Syrian President Bashar Assad, including Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front, and for siding with a self-proclaimed but not internationally recognized Libyan government aligned with Islamist militias from the western city of Misurata.

"They made the wrong call in a number of places, and there's some recognition of that," said analyst Michael Stephens, deputy director of the Qatar branch of the Royal United Services Institute, a British think tank. "But their fundamental views on political Islam have not altered."

At the other end of the spectrum, the most potent emblem of Qatar's desire to maintain friendly ties with the West has been throwing in its lot with the U.S.-led coalition confronting the Sunni Muslim extremists of Islamic State. But it plays a supporting role, albeit a crucial one, instead of conducting airstrikes.

Qatar's 34-year-old emir, Sheik Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, described by Western diplomats as proving himself a quick study so far in his 19-month tenure, has offered a tellingly nuanced view of the emirate's strategy.

"We don't fund extremists," he told CNN's Christiane Amanpour in the fall. But he said it would be a "big mistake" to brand all Islamist movements as extremist, and defended dealings with groups such as Hamas and the Brotherhood on the basis of their electoral successes in Gaza and Egypt.

Because of those links, the Qatari partnership with the United States is sometimes complicated but clearly beneficial to both sides. "Our interests converge in many more ways than they diverge," said a senior U.S. official, who asked to remain anonymous because of the perceived sensitivity of the subject.

The emirate's role as an interlocutor with militant movements has often proved a useful asset. Together with Turkey, Qatar was a principal pipeline to Hamas during talks to end the group's war with Israel in the Gaza Strip during the summer.

In addition, it helped broker the freeing of five Taliban militants incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba -- who took up residence in Doha -- in exchange for captured U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl.

The emirate also engineered last year's release of an American journalist, Peter Theo Curtis, who had been held hostage in Syria, a lucky exception to last year's grisly parade of beheadings of Western reporters and aid workers by Islamic State.

At Al Udeid Air Base on the outskirts of Doha, Qatar's capital, deference to Qatari sensitivities is much in evidence despite the overwhelming American footprint. The base is Qatari-owned, its U.S. personnel constantly emphasize, with access by outsiders vetted by the Qatari bureaucracy.

The installation in many ways resembles American-run military bases anywhere, with fast-food outlets and a staggering array of familiar U.S. goods on offer at the general store.

But here, force strength is a matter to be negotiated with the emirate, not dictated by the Pentagon. Coalition pilots even undergo Qatari customs checks when flying combat sorties from the base.

Around the clock, the dusty air is filled with the near-constant roar from the flight line, from which 300 or more missions are launched daily, many on bombing raids against Islamic State positions in Iraq and Syria, but also to destinations spread across the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

The humming command center -- and the base as a whole -- is a kind of low-slung, high-tech Tower of Babel, even though English, the language of aviation, is the lingua franca. U.S. Air Force Col. Tadd Sholtis, a spokesman for the Air Force's Central Command, said Al Udeid's importance as a forward headquarters is obvious, but "maybe more important is its role as a location where military professionals from many nations and services can come together."

It can be jarring, nonetheless, to drive the short distance from a military installation bristling with U.S. Patriot antimissile batteries into Doha, where Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal's walled villa lies in the same pleasant bougainvillea-dotted neighborhood that is home to a number of diplomats, including the U.S. ambassador.

Another long-term guest is Yusuf Qaradawi, 88, an Egyptian-born cleric who recently landed on Interpol's wanted list, largely at Egypt's insistence. Qaradawi lost his electronic pulpit when his much-watched show, "Sharia and Life," was dropped by Al Jazeera last year, but he still has nearly a million Twitter followers, and Qatari officials have made it clear that he remains welcome.

Like most of its Sunni neighbors, Qatar has no wish for home rule based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, or for any challenge to its hereditary monarchy. Although social mores are conservative, with most women adopting the face-covering niqab , the emirate accepts differing cultural practices by expatriates. Alcohol is served in the many five-star hotels, and Westerners in casual and sometimes revealing dress are a common sight in the capital.

The emirate's population is about 2 million, but only 300,000 are citizens, a population equivalent to a small city -- a small but extremely rich one. Even with a large and poorly paid workforce, mainly from South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, that labors away on gargantuan infrastructure projects, Qatari per capita income is by some estimates the highest in the world.

Combined with Qatar's extreme wealth is a local habit of casually carrying around what most Westerners would consider an outlandish amount of cash. It wouldn't be unusual, one diplomat said, for a Qatari shopping in a boutique-studded mall to spot a donation stand for a charity claiming to fund Syrian relief efforts, and impulsively pop $15,000 into the collection box.

The result is a labyrinthian money trail that perhaps not even the Qataris themselves can accurately follow.

From the outside, the dynamics of Qatar's external relations can appear puzzling and contradictory, but close observers see a distinct internal logic.

"Sometimes you see alliances based on 'the enemy of my enemy' concept, with the idea of playing one ally off against the other," said a Western diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the emirate's regional dealings.

"It's more," he said, "along the lines of: 'Just because the two of you are enemies, there's no reason I can't be friends with both of you. Because I might need you one day.' "

RETURN TO TOP

7. 'There is no right to insult Islam'

The Post's Lally Weymouth interviews Turkey's prime minister

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. B1 | Lally Weymouth

In a hotel room in Davos, Switzerland, this past week, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu talked about the differences between his country and the United States over how to handle Syria and the Islamic State. Both nations agree that the two crises demand urgent action, but they part ways on priorities and tactics. They almost reached an

agreement in December, but the deal fell apart. Davutoglu talked to The Washington Post about what happens next. Edited excerpts follow.

You marched in the Paris demonstration following the recent killings at Charlie Hebdo. Do you agree with French President François Hollande that there has to be a fight against Islamic terror?

The term "Islamic terror" is wrong. We never identify any terrorist activity with religious identity.

But they identified themselves...

They didn't say they were Islamic terrorists.

So who were they?

They themselves claimed they had contacts with ISIS or al-Qaeda in Yemen. We are against this, but we are also against using terror and Islam together.

Hayat Boumeddiene, the partner of one of the French killers, escaped through Turkey into Syria. Is Turkey turning a blind eye?

There was no intelligence report on her coming from France to Turkey. Our police discovered this after they got the list of names and informed France that she could have come to Turkey. One day before the attack in Paris, there was a terrorist attack in Istanbul and a policeman was killed by a suicide bomber. So the police were on alert.

There is a lot of talk of strains over Syria policy between the U.S. and Turkey. About two years ago, your then Prime-Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan pushed the U.S. to create a no-fly zone. But it didn't, and the Syrian opposition became weaker. Is Turkey now at odds with the U.S. administration? Isn't the U.S. administration saying America's priority is to fight ISIS, while Turkey says it is crucial to see Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fall?

In a potential crisis, if you don't take necessary measures at the early stage, at a later stage you face much bigger problems. Yes, two years ago we were asking to have a no-fly zone . . . to allow the moderate Syrian opposition to have control in the north of Syria. If the opposition had been supported, there wouldn't be the threat of ISIS.

Since we didn't protect civilians or help the opposition, there was a tactical cooperation between the Assad regime and ISIS. When the Assad regime attacked opposition positions, [rebel] forces had to leave those towns and cities. The ISIS forces then occupied these towns. There was no fighting between the regime and ISIS until last summer. The presence of ISIS helped Assad to stay in power because everyone said there was a terrorist treat - it helped Assad legitimize himself in the eyes of the international community.

So what would you like to see the U.S. do?

Our position is that we need to have an integrated strategy for the future of Syria. If we eliminate ISIS without such a strategy, another terrorist organization will emerge.

Once again do you want a no-fly zone?

Of course. No more refugees.

Does that mean taking out Syrian antiaircraft weapons?

If there is a strong message from the coalition that there should not be any more air bombardment, the Syrian regime will have to stop bombing civilians. The moderate opposition has to be trained and equipped to create a third alternative.

U.S. officials have said trained opposition fighters won't be deployed until spring.

That is too late. We should not allow the Syrian people to be under two pressures - the regime and ISIS. A third option is needed - the moderate opposition. In that force, there should be no foreign fighters. Only Syrians should defend Syria. There have been foreign fighters on the regime side - Hezbollah, Shiite militias from Iraq and Iran. All foreign fighters should leave Syria.

Who is going to make them do that?

We have to strengthen the Syrian forces.

That would take a long time.

It would have been easier two years ago. But this is the only option.

Isn't it too late?

What is the other option?

The U.S. wants to use your Incirlik Air Base to bomb ISIS, and Turkey has not given permission for this.

To use our air base, we want to see an integrated strategy - to create a no-fly zone and a safe haven for refugees so that there will be no more refugees in Turkey.

Reportedly, there were negotiations in December to give the U.S. and the coalition the right to use the base - and for Turkey to help in the fight against ISIS.

Yes, there was almost an agreement, and there is still a possible agreement. What we want is simple - we don't want to see any refugee flow or air bombardment by the Syrian regime. We don't want to see the presence of terrorist groups. The best way is to declare a safe haven.

It seems that the U.S. is saying that America's priority is to defeat ISIS, not to defeat Assad.

We say both threats should be taken care of simultaneously. We have to have a strategy to defend the Syrian people against ISIS and the Assad regime simultaneously. We have 1.7 million refugees, and [while] 1.5 million escaped from Assad, only 200,000 escaped from ISIS. So if we want to have peace in Syria, we have only one criteria.

Get rid of Assad?

Yes. If 2 million refugees decide to go home one day, that is peace. Otherwise, eliminating ISIS will not bring peace to Syria. Refugees will stay in Turkey if they see Assad is sitting in power in Damascus. They know well that they will be killed if they go home.

At the same time, your government just hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is supporting Assad.

Yes, but we have a comprehensive economic relationship [with Russia]. We have energy cooperation.

More than 50 percent of your natural gas comes from Russia.

Around 65 percent of our natural gas.

Yet the Russians are strongly backing Assad.

The U.S. is talking to Russia - this is diplomacy.

Were you disappointed when President Obama drew a red line on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and then did not act when the regime used them?

Drawing a red line and not committing to it gives more courage to the aggressor. In those days when the U.S. administration requested our support to join the coalition of the willing against chemical weapons, we joined immediately. But the Syrian regime misused good intentions. Still they have a chemical weapons capacity. Nothing has changed. They killed 300,000 people, and there are [millions of internally displaced people as well as millions of refugees]. Still, Assad is in power. There are people who think he may remain in power after so many crimes against humanity. This is unacceptable.

How close is Aleppo to falling?

The moderate opposition is defending certain neighborhoods. But if the air bombardments continue, it will be difficult for them. If Aleppo falls, another 1 million refugees may come to Turkey.

Right now, coalition planes are flying side by side with Syrian planes - isn't that so?

There is an agreement that they will not attack each other.

People in the U.S. are very critical of the treatment of journalists in Turkey.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there were 10 journalists in prison. They discovered that three of them had been released and the rest had been put in prison in the '90s - one for killing a policeman and another for a shooting.

But the prosecutor went after Cumhuriyet, a Turkish newspaper, for printing the cartoon that was on the memorial issue of Charlie Hebdo.

Not only in Turkey but in many places, this was a provocation. I was in Paris to defend the right [of free speech]. But no one has the right to insult and to provoke the masses. It is a legal procedure. Even against Christians, no one can use provocative language.

Didn't you go to Paris to celebrate freedom of the press?

It doesn't mean I am defending insulting the prophet of a religion. There is no right to insult Islam or Muslims.

Turkey's relations with Israel seem to be on a downward spiral. Is there any hope relations will be renewed?

We were very close in the spring of 2013, when [thanks to] the efforts of [President] Obama, [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu apologized to Turkey [for Israel's raid on a Turkish ship bound for Gaza]. But later they stopped the talks on compensation.

--Lally Weymouth is a senior associate editor for The Washington Post

RETURN TO TOP

IRAQ/SYRIA

8. Coalition air raids back up Kurdish advance in Iraq – US

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 24 | Dan De Luce

US-led forces have carried out dozens of air strikes in Iraq to back up Kurdish forces advancing against Islamic State jihadists near the strategic city of Mosul, the American military said Saturday.

Over the past 72 hours, US and coalition aircraft conducted 46 bombing raids in support of Kurdish peshmerga troops near Mosul and 80 hours of reconnaissance flights, the military said in a statement.

Kurdish officials said previously that they cut a key road that links Mosul with Tal Afar to the west.

The US military's statement confirmed that "forces from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region seized ground formerly held by the enemy, including a critical road junction that ISIL was using to resupply their stronghold in Mosul."

The statement also said that coalition air power and other assistance in recent days meant that Kurdish forces "now hold the gains they have made and are postured to retake additional territory from ISIL in vicinity of Mosul."

US and Iraqi commanders have vowed to recapture the large stretch of territory seized by the IS group last year and Mosul is seen as a pivotal battleground in any future counter-offensive.

General Lloyd Austin, head of US Central Command, told the Wall Street Journal on Thursday that Iraqi troops should be ready to launch an operation to try and retake Mosul by the summer.

After nearly 2,000 air strikes against IS extremists in Iraq and Syria since August, the IS group still holds virtually all of the ground it captured last year, including much of western Anbar province.

But US commanders say the air war has halted the IS group's momentum, killed thousands of its fighters and put it on the defensive.

The head of "Operation Inherent Resolve," Lieutenant General James Terry, said this week's Kurdish operation "is another superb example" of how the IS group can be defeated using "well-led ground forces" assisted and advised by the US-led coalition.

The military's statement was issued by Terry's command which is based in Kuwait.

RETURN TO TOP

9. Kurdish forces fire into Islamic State-controlled Mosul
Reuters, Jan. 24 | Isabel Coles

ARBIL, Iraq -- Kurdish forces have fired rockets into Mosul for the first time since Islamic State militants overran the northern Iraqi city last summer, Kurdish military sources said on Saturday.

A Kurdish officer said 20 Grad missiles had been launched into Mosul on Friday after receiving information that Islamic State militants were gathering to meet near the city's Zuhour neighborhood.

"We hit their positions," said Captain Shivan Ahmed, who belongs to the unit that fired the rockets from around 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of Mosul.

Kurdish officials said the strikes had hit their intended target, but two residents of Mosul contacted by Reuters said three civilians were killed in the attack.

It was not possible to independently verify the accounts.

Following the attack, Islamic State militants published images of a girl lying in a hospital bed, whom they said had been wounded by fire from the Kurdish peshmerga fighters.

U.S.-led airstrikes regularly target areas outside of Mosul, but rarely strike inside the city due to concerns about civilian casualties.

A statement attributed to an unnamed senior Kurdish military source and posted on the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party's official website said the shelling had "struck great fear into the hearts of the terrorists".

Peshmerga forces this week launched a ground offensive northwest of Mosul backed by coalition airstrikes, reclaiming nearly 500 square kilometers of territory and cutting the extremist group's main supply line from the city to the west.

Twenty-one senior Islamic State militants were killed during the operation, the Kurdistan Region's Security Council said in a statement on Friday.

It said the slain Islamic State leaders included the head of Nineveh province's administrative institutions and a close commander of its special forces, the statement said.

There was no way to independently verify the claims.

RETURN TO TOP

10. Sacred texts and the sword: Inside Isis training camps

Reports have emerged of another hostage beheading by Isis militants, whose vicious tactics have caused widespread fear. But little is known of the training that produces such brutality. Hassan Hassan gained unique access to fighters to explore the ideology that drives them

The Observer (UK), Jan. 25, Pg. 30 | Hassan Hassan

Hamid Ghannam's first day at an Islamic State (Isis) training camp was intense. Very early on the morning of 13 August, he picked up his packed clothes and walked quickly to the main street in his village to meet three of his cousins. As with many of Isis's young members, he did so without informing his parents.

The cousins drove in a white minibus to an Isis camp at the Omar oilfield in the desert of Mayadeen, Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria. The recruiter, a distant relative who had enlisted around eight others from his village since he was put in charge of its security, accompanied the three to their new lodging, where they would spend the next few weeks.

At the oilfield the recruiter spoke to an Isis member for a few minutes before he excused himself. "Keep our heads high," he told his relatives as he drove away. Another Isis member welcomed the three recruits and asked them to prepare themselves for sharia lessons. "It is not easy, you have to be patient," Ghannam said. "They test you first. They speak with you for a while. They check your knowledge of religion. They discuss with you everything. They talk to you about the Nusayri [pejorative reference to Alawites] regime and then about the Free Syrian Army and all the misguided groups. It is exhausting at first."

Little is known about what goes on inside training camps run by Isis in areas under its control in Iraq and Syria - particularly its religious component. The Isis ideology is generally viewed as identical to al-Qaida's or the Saudi version of Salafism - adherence to fundamental Islamic tenets - and so there does not seem to be a serious effort to study it more closely. There is also a tendency to play down the role of religious ideology as a recruitment tool, since the motives of many Isis members have little to do with religion.

Another problem that muddles understanding of Isis's appeal is that politicians tend to deliberately misrepresent the role of ideology to undermine the group's propaganda, while objective observers often have no access to Isis associates beyond social media. As a result, a flawed understanding of the ideological appeal of Isis is common, despite its central role in the fight against it. Both the commander of the American special operations forces in the Middle East, Major General Michael Nagata, and the general in charge of leading the international coalition against Isis, John Allen, have emphasised that the ideology of Isis is insufficiently understood and that ideological delegitimisation is crucial in the effort to defeat it.

So what specific ideas, stories and narratives do new members learn at these camps? What does Isis tell its new recruits to make them so zealously committed to its ideology? More important, does the Isis ideology serve to attract or merely retain new recruits?

As part of research involving in-depth interviews with Isis members for a book about the organisation, American analyst Michael Weiss and I have identified half a dozen categories of Isis members according to the factors that drew them to the group. In at least two of those categories, religion more than anything else has been the driving force. But these two demographic components - long-standing takfiris (radicals who adhere to teachings that

declare fellow Muslims as infidels) and young zealots - are more central for Isis than other members because they formulate the group's identity and ensure its resilience. In addition, the appeal of Isis outside its conflict zones tends to be primarily ideologically driven.

Sharia training varies from one member to another, depending on the group's assessment of his value or loyalty. New recruits join training that ranges from two weeks, one month, 45 days, six months up to one year. Inside the camps, students receive a mix of military, political and sharia orientation, usually given by around five instructors. During training, recruits can be dispatched to checkpoints but not to the frontlines. After they graduate, they will remain under supervision and can be expelled or punished in case of noncompliance - including being lashed if they express reservations. In some cases, new members who struggle with the brutality of the group's acts will be sent back to receive more training to "strengthen" their faith.

"You first get the basics about religion," said Abu Moussa, an Isis-affiliated religious cleric in eastern Syria but originally from Aleppo. "They cleanse you from religious innovations and Ba'athist ideas. Issuing fatwas is restricted to clerics and nobody can kill without a fatwa unless in the battlefield. You also study Arabic and learn how to speak in standard Arabic if you don't know."

Clerics in charge of religious training at Isis, known as sharii, are mostly academically qualified and have longstanding experience within the organisation's ranks. Isis also relies on young clerics who have recently joined its ranks to compensate for the shortage of imams to cover the approximately 20 mosques in every town that falls under its control. It often uses imams with limited religious training to speak at pulpits across eastern Syria and western Iraq, where mosques had typically been controlled by Sufis from the Naqshbandi order or its Khaznawi branch before Isis arrived. (Isis also uses local imams to pit local residents against each other as part of its divide and rule strategy.) These imams are generally asked to preach about three key concepts that are shared by all Salafi and jihadist groups, but Isis has its own take on their functionalities, namely tawhid (strict monotheism), bida'a (deviation in religious matters) and wala wal baraa (loyalty to Islam and disloyalty to anything un-Islamic).

"People say al-dawla excommunicates Muslims," said Abu Moussa, using the term "al-dawla", or State, in reference to Isis. "We don't do that. Yes, we have no tolerance for anybody who opposes our message. Why do we fight the Free Syrian Army? We spread our message by proselytisation and sword. Ibn Taymiyyah said 'the foundation of this religion is a book that guides and a sword that brings victory'. We guide and the sword brings victory. If someone opposes the message of the prophet, he faces nothing but the sword. As the prophet spread the message across the Earth, we are doing the same. When al-dawla first fought the Free Syrian Army, it was a problem for many. They did not believe the accusations. But later, one thing after another began to unfold and people started to accept them."

Another member echoed Abu Moussa's reasoning. "The prophet said: 'I have been given victory by means of terror.' As for slaughter, beheading and crucifixion, this is in the Qu'ran and Sunna [oral sayings attributed to prophet Muhammad]. In the videos we produce, you see the sentence 'deal with them in a way that strikes fear in those behind them', and that verse speaks for itself. One more thing: the prophet told the people of Quraish, 'with slaughter I came to you'."

In terms of indoctrination, Isis generally steers clear of exposing new members to teachings that are not derived from sharia texts. New members are almost exclusively exposed to religious books, while established members or commanders can study manuals such as Management of Savagery, a jihad book written by an Abu Bakr Naji, who said that you should distinguish between jihad and other religious tenets in that jihad is not about mercy but about

extreme retaliatory violence to deter enemies. The restriction of religious training to religious texts is in line with the group's rhetoric that it is an extension of authentic Islam rather than a new group with its own set of teachings.

Indeed, one of the fascinating insights we found is that Isis presents the "mainstream" Islam practised by Muslims today as one that was "invented" over the past few decades. To unravel this so-called invented Islam, Isis deliberately digs deep into Islamic sharia and history to find arcane teaching and then magnify it. It does so to shock its potential recruits and demonstrate it is preaching a pure and true Islam obscured by the mainstream. Take, for example, the group's punishment for individuals accused of homosexuality. In a series of incidents in recent weeks, Isis has thrown individuals accused of being gay from the highest buildings. This method as a sharia punishment is unheard of, even in countries where sharia brute justice is openly practised, such as Saudi Arabia.

Unlike previous incidents of stoning adulterers and crucifixion, throwing people from high buildings did not even inspire criticism of sharia in the Middle East because many did not realise it was a sharia penalty in the first place. But it is the obscurity of the punishment that makes it particularly valuable for Isis. The purpose is not to increase the volume of violence but also to raise eyebrows and trigger questions about such practices, which Isis is more capable of answering than mainstream clerics, who prefer to conceal teachings that propound such punishments. Many Isis members were eager to emphasise they were impressed by such obscure teachings, and were drawn to the group by the way Isis presents Islam with absolute lucidity. Mothanna Abdulsattar, for example, spoke about the group's "intellectualism and the way it spreads religion and fights injustice".

The process of indoctrination does not always happen after members join. In many cases, people are drawn to Isis during conversations with members or sermons conducted by clerics weeks or even months before they start considering enrolment. By the time an individual is formally recruited, he will have at least bought into Isis ideology. Inside the camp, Isis benefits from relating these hidden, obscure stories to formulate its own narrative.

Isis depends heavily on what Muslim clerics consider isolated incidents described in sacred texts that it believes should not be followed as rules. The function of such incidents is not necessarily to argue a doctrinal idea. Isis sometimes uses them to help members who struggle with beheading, for example, to justify what they have done. When these stories are weaved into the overall ideology of Isis, new members find it easier to accept them.

The argument that these acts are not Islamic often ignores how such stories are told. For instance, Isis tells the story of Muhammad's commander-in-chief, Khaled bin al-Walid, who killed hundreds of captives after the 7th-century battle of Ullais in Iraq, seemingly contrary to Islamic teachings, because he had made a pledge to God that he would make a river of blood from the Persian army if he overran it. When he could not find enough people to make a river out of their blood after he defeated them, he killed the captives and opened a dam into their bleeding bodies. Isis uses the story to say this is the man described by the prophet as the Unleashed Sword of God and who was praised for his victory in that battle by the first Muslim caliph, Abu Bakr. When Isis kills its captives, a Muslim cleric can dismiss the act as un-Islamic, but Isis can simply cite the example of al-Walid.

Because Isis bases its teachings on religious texts that mainstream Muslim clerics do not want to deal with head on, new recruits leave the camp feeling that they have stumbled on the true message of Islam. New recruits such as Ghannam and his cousins graduate armed with theological arguments, military training and a conviction that fellow Muslims are at least partly complicit in the suppression of true Islam.

--Hassan Hassan is an analyst at the Delma Institute, a research centre in Abu Dhabi. He is the co-author, along with Michael Weiss, of Isis: Inside the Army of Terror, which will be published in February in New York by Regan Arts

RETURN TO TOP

AFRICA

11. Nigerian troops fight Boko Haram in Maiduguri – military, vigilantes, locals

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 25 | Not Attributed

Nigerian troops on Sunday engaged Boko Haram fighters in a fierce battle in the restive northeastern city of Maiduguri, the military, vigilantes and residents said.

"Troops are repelling a simultaneous attack on Monguno and Maiduguri by terrorists," the defence headquarters said on Twitter.

It said an air and land operation was going on against the Islamists, adding that a curfew had been imposed on the embattled city which has been the epicentre of the six-year-old Boko Haram insurgency.

Fears have been growing for months about a possible strike on Maiduguri after the Islamist militants began seizing towns and villages in three northeast states about six months ago.

On January 3, they captured the fishing hub of Baga, in the far north of Borno State, which security analysts said put them in a better position to strike south to hit Maiduguri, the state capital.

Locals said fighting was on-going and that the extremists first attacked Jintilo settlement on the outskirts of the city around 5:00 am (0400 GMT).

But they met stiff resistance from troops stationed in the village, just five kilometres (three miles) from Maiduguri, where Boko Haram was founded in 2002.

"Fighting is still going on since 5:00 am at Jintilo between Boko Haram and soldiers. We have all evacuated our homes," said Mustapha Zaraye, a resident of a housing estate near the scene.

"More soldiers are deploying to Jintilo," he added.

Residents on the southern outskirts of the city moved out of their homes and poured into the city as fighting raged.

"It is flying bullets everywhere. All we hear are sounds of guns and explosions," said Buba Kyari, a resident of Moronti neighbourhood, near Jintilo.

"A rocket-propelled grenade hit and killed a person from my neighbourhood who was fleeing into the city."

A military jet was seen overhead and began aerial bombings of Boko Haram positions, a member of a civilian vigilante group fighting alongside the troops said.

"The attackers have been subdued and are in disarray," the vigilante added, asking to remain anonymous for security reasons.

RETURN TO TOP

12. Africa's Islamic State

A jihadist insurgency in Nigeria is turning into a regional conflict

The Economist, Jan. 24, Pg. 44 | Not Attributed

Deflecting blame is a skill prized by politicians the world over. Many could, however, still learn a thing or two from Goodluck Jonathan, the president of Nigeria, who has found no end of scapegoats for Boko Haram, a vicious insurgent group in the north-east of Africa's most populous country. Mr Jonathan's most common evasion is that Boko Haram is a regional problem that cannot be solved by Nigeria alone.

His excuses seem, unfortunately, to be metamorphosing into fact. Boko Haram is now spreading its poison into neighbouring states: The kidnapping of about 80 Cameroonians from villages near the border with Nigeria has shone a light on its growing clout throughout the countries around Lake Chad.

Further north in Niger, in the once-sleepy fishing village of Kirikiri, makeshift huts are crammed with refugees who have fled Boko Haram, which loosely translates as "western education is forbidden". Every day dozens more wade off boats, their few possessions held high over their heads. Security is deteriorating fast. Shortly after your correspondent's arrival on a visit last year, armed guards became nervous, urging the party to move on in case it became a target. In the nearby hospital in Diffa, Nigerian soldiers lay three to a bed, bleeding through their bandages, after retreating across the border.

Boko Haram, which has killed thousands in its fight to establish a "caliphate", has seldom shown much regard for national boundaries. It readily retreats across them when threatened, or crosses into neighbouring states to recruit and train disaffected young men, as it has recently been doing in Diffa.

Yet it had not previously nursed the same apocalyptic ambitions in neighbouring countries as it does in Nigeria. That may be changing. Many experts now think it hopes to replicate the ancient Kanem-Bornu Empire that once spanned bits of Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

So far, Cameroon has been the worst afflicted of Nigeria's neighbours. Kidnappings on its soil have become ever more audacious over the past year. The government has responded by deploying troops to the northern borders, prompting reprisals from the militants. In December, Boko Haram briefly overran a military base in Cameroon and attacked five villages. With the situation spiralling, pressure is mounting on regional governments to respond, but their efforts have been ineffectual. Last year the Lake Chad countries agreed to deploy a multinational task force to fight the insurgency; several countries pledged to send 700 soldiers each. But plans have stalled as they bicker over details, including the right of hot pursuit.

A meeting beginning in Niger on January 20th was supposed to set wheels in motion, though at the time The Economist went to press little appeared to have been agreed on. Other initiatives also appear to have floundered. A French plan to set up an intelligence fusion centre was left with little intelligence to fuse when most of those taking part neglected to send liaison officers. The regional economic grouping, ECOWAS, says it may also request an African Union force to tackle the problem. Whether that is likely to materialise is another question. AU troops are

already stretched across the continent -- in Somalia, Central African Republic and Mali, among other places -- and may not have the resources to respond, says Ryan Cummings of red24, a crisis management group.

Nigeria's prickly government would, moreover, probably reject the notion of foreign forces fighting on its soil. Yet there is little left to justify its pride. Nigeria's army suffers from weak morale -- at least 66 soldiers are on death row over their refusal to fight last year -- and its units have often fled (the army calls it tactical manoeuvring) before the militants.

Western countries appear to be losing patience. Relations with America have cooled noticeably since revelations of the Nigerian army's abuses of human rights. In response, Nigeria cancelled a programme under which American soldiers trained Nigerian ones. American is now offering help to Cameroon instead.

Chad, which has so far escaped the escalating crisis, recently began the deployment of 2,000 soldiers to assist Cameroon on the Nigerian border. Its army has a good track record against insurgents, most recently in Mali in 2013. Yet Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram's leader, seems unconcerned. He declared in a recent video: "The kings of Africa, you are late. I challenge you to attack me even now."

But for all the spillover, the problem is largely a Nigerian one. With elections approaching on February 14th, many politicians are focused more on their campaigns than on fighting the insurgency. Until Nigeria's leaders show that they can take the war as seriously as they do politicking, it will be impossible to curb Boko Haram -- even with regional forces to help.

RETURN TO TOP

UKRAINE/RUSSIA

13. Rebels push toward Ukrainian port city
Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A18 | Karoun Demirjian

MOSCOW - The key port city of Mariupol became the latest flash point of rapidly intensifying hostilities in eastern Ukraine on Saturday, as a barrage of rocket fire struck the area, killing dozens of civilians, and pro-Russian rebels announced a push toward the strategic coastal city that serves as Ukraine's last bastion of control in the region.

The onslaught on Mariupol, which separates Russia from its annexed territory of Crimea, comes just a day after pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk rejected an existing cease-fire agreement and pledged to press their offensive all the way to the borders of the region.

Saturday's shelling sparked a fresh wave of outrage in Kiev and among its allies, who blame the rebels and Russia for the bloody event and warned that if Moscow did not withdraw support for the separatists, the West would step up already punishing pressure against Russia.

But the quick and dramatic escalation of hostilities and the silence from the Kremlin Saturday as at the death toll climbed - at least 30 civilians, according to city officials - suggests that neither sanctions, nor low oil prices, nor other economic difficulties are likely to persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to heed Western demands to help end the conflict.

Donetsk rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko announced the Mariupol offensive on Saturday during a memorial service to the victims of a recent bus stop shelling in Donetsk, calling it "the best monument to all our dead," according to Russian state news agency RIA Novosti.

Zakharchenko later clarified on a rebel Web site that the drive on Mariupol was to "suppress" the Ukrainian troops to the east of it, not storm the city. He also charged that the shelling of civilians was an incident of friendly fire by Ukrainian forces, who then tried to blame the rebels for their mistake.

But Ukrainian officials said at least three Grad rocket-launching systems had fired on Mariupol and squarely blamed the rebels for the civilian deaths. President Petro Poroshenko called the shelling "a crime against humanity." And National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksandr Turchynov said, "Putin is directly responsible."

Kiev and its allies believe the rebels' new offensive on Mariupol and Debaltseve - a strategically important city on the route from Donetsk to Luhansk - along with other areas of eastern Ukraine is being fueled by Russian reinforcements. Ukrainian officials said over 9,000 Russian troops are operating in Ukraine this week.

U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry also decried Russia on Saturday for its "irresponsible and dangerous decision" to resupply rebels in recent weeks, warning that if Russia did not pull back "all weapons, fighters and financial backing" for the separatists, "U.S. and international pressure on Russia and its proxies will only increase."

Neither the Kremlin nor Russia's Foreign Ministry reacted to the deadly events in Mariupol on Saturday. But Russian officials have routinely denied Western accusations that they are sending troops or weapons into eastern Ukraine to support the pro-Russian rebels fighting there.

Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov also cautioned the West against trying to push Putin through sanctions Friday, saying that a Russian would "never, never turn away and give up his leader" because of outside pressure, and warning that continued economic sanctions against Russia "will be a bleeding wound for decades."

The United States and Europe have applied several rounds of sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and its involvement in Ukraine.

Since clashes between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists began in April, Mariupol has largely been under the control of the government in Kiev.

But the area around Mariupol was the scene of intense fighting between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian rebels during the late summer, as rebels - backed by Russian support, Ukrainian officials maintained - made a push for the city. That was shortly before the two sides agreed to a cease-fire in Minsk, Belarus, in early September.

That cease-fire is now effectively dead, after pro-Russian rebel leaders in Donetsk said Friday they were no longer recognizing it and would not initiate any new peace talks.

The United Nations estimated Friday that almost 5,100 people have died in Ukraine since the fighting began last April - 262 in the past nine days before the updated figure was published, making it the deadliest period since this summer, before the Minsk cease-fire agreement was signed.

RETURN TO TOP

14. Russian troops support rebel offensive in Ukraine, NATO says
Reuters, Jan. 25 | Adrian Croft

BRUSSELS -- NATO said on Saturday that Russian troops were supporting a rebel offensive in eastern Ukraine with sophisticated missiles, rockets and drones and demanded Moscow halt its support.

Pro-Russian rebels launched an offensive against the strategic port of Mariupol in eastern Ukraine and officials there said rebel rockets had killed at least 30 people.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said fighting in eastern Ukraine had sharply escalated, with indications of a large-scale offensive by Russian-backed separatists at multiple locations in the Donetsk and Luhansk districts as well as against Mariupol.

"This is in utter disregard of the ceasefire," he said in a statement.

"Russian troops in eastern Ukraine are supporting these offensive operations with command and control systems, air defense systems with advanced surface-to-air missiles, unmanned aerial systems (drones), advanced multiple rocket launcher systems and electronic warfare systems," he said.

"I strongly urge Russia to stop its military, political and financial support for the separatists, stop destabilizing Ukraine and respect its international commitments," he said.

Russia denies having troops in eastern Ukraine.

Latvia, which currently holds the European Union's presidency, called for EU foreign ministers to hold an extraordinary meeting to discuss the situation.

European Council President Donald Tusk said on Twitter that he had held an urgent phone call with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to discuss what the international community should do in the face of the increasing violence.

"Once again, appeasement encourages the aggressor to greater acts of violence. Time to step up our policy based on cold facts, not illusions," he said on Twitter.

Tusk, a former Polish prime minister who is hawkish toward Russia, did not specify what he was referring to.

But the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, seen as dovish toward Russia, suggested in a memo this month that EU governments could start talking to Russia again about global diplomacy, trade and other issues if Moscow implemented the Minsk peace agreement to end the Ukraine conflict.

Mogherini's proposals were met with suspicion by some EU countries that feared they would send the message to Russian President Vladimir Putin that the EU's resolve was weakening.

Mogherini said in a statement on Saturday however that the further escalation of the Ukraine conflict "would inevitably lead to a further grave deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia."

The 28-nation EU has joined the United States in imposing economic sanctions on Russia over its involvement in Ukraine, but the bloc is divided about any further escalation of sanctions.

RETURN TO TOP

EUROPE

15. Belgium Confronts the Jihadist Danger Within

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A6 | Andrew Higgins

BRUSSELS -- When Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Belgian-born son of an immigrant shopkeeper from Morocco, went to Syria a year ago to wage jihad, nobody paid much attention. He was just one of more than two dozen angry young men from the grimy Molenbeek district in Brussels who, lured by the promise of adventure and reward from God, have taken up the fight for Islam.

But people took notice, a few months later, when Mr. Abaaoud recruited his own 13-year-old brother to join him in Syria, soon after the release of a gruesome video that showed him in a pickup truck dragging a pile of mutilated bodies.

"Naturally, this was a big shock," Yasmina, their older sibling, said, referring to her barely teenage brother's departure.

In recent days, that feeling has only grown as Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who is thought to have returned to Europe, has emerged as a prime suspect in what Belgian authorities say was an imminent terrorist operation thwarted by raids on Jan. 15 on an extremist hideaway in the east of Belgium and nine homes in Molenbeek.

Coming on the heels of a three-day rampage by a trio of Islamic extremists in Paris, the foiled plot here sent an alarming message that the radicalization of young Muslims extended far beyond the bleak housing projects that ring Paris and other French cities.

It has also highlighted the dangers posed by a well-developed underground jihadist pipeline that has made Belgium Europe's biggest per capita contributor of fighters to Syria, and the fears of the potential havoc these extremists could sow upon their return.

Despite the attention focused on France since the attacks in and around Paris that killed 17 people, the proportion of young people who have left for jihad from this relatively small country has confronted the authorities here with an outsize domestic security threat that rivals that of its neighbor.

In a document released in October, a new Belgian government warned against the "danger of violent jihadism that threatens to spread in our society," reporting that 350 Belgians had gone to Syria and that more than 70 of them had returned home.

Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a Belgian researcher who has kept close tabs on Syria-bound jihadists from Belgium, said the real number of Belgian fighters is closer to 450, less than half the number from France but still a very large contingent for a country of only 11 million people. Belgium, like France, has a large Muslim community that accounts for more than 5 percent of the population.

Belgian officials say they have not found any links between the Paris attacks and those they say were being planned in Belgium. But there are many common elements: a clustering of radicals in a small area, the blurred boundary between petty criminality and jihadist violence, and the role of prison as an incubator for extremism.

Since the Belgian police raided a house in the eastern city of Verviers, near the German border, on Jan. 15, the focus of the investigation has moved firmly to Brussels, particularly the Molenbeek district, a heavily immigrant borough with 22 mosques known to the local officials -- more than four times the number of churches -- and others that operate in secret.

"The network that was dismantled in Verviers is a network that had its origins in Molenbeek," said Françoise Schepmans, the mayor of Molenbeek. "That is evident. They just rented a hideaway at Verviers."

The two terrorist suspects killed in that police raid, the mayor added, "were both, unfortunately, from Molenbeek," Belgium's second poorest area with a youth unemployment rate of 40 percent.

The Belgian prosecutor's office on Wednesday partially identified the dead men for the first time, naming them as Sofiane A., a Belgian and Moroccan citizen born in 1988, and Khalid B., a Belgian national born in 1991.

Why exactly certain areas spawn a disproportionate number of violent jihadists is a question that has largely flummoxed investigators and scholars.

Mr. Van Ostaeyen, the Belgian researcher, believes that an important factor for Molenbeek could be the role of Sharia4Belgium, an outfit set up in 2010 to promote Islamic law but which later devoted its energies to recruiting fighters for Syria. It was particularly active in Molenbeek, Mr. Van Ostaeyen said.

The group's leader, Fouad Belkacem, a 32-year-old Islamic radical with a long arrest record for crimes like theft and assault, went on trial last September in the port city of Antwerp, accused by prosecutors of belonging to a terrorist group and brainwashing young people.

More than 40 others accused of belonging to the group were also put on trial, most of them in absentia, as they were in Syria. A verdict in the case was originally due earlier this month but has now been postponed.

Like Mr. Belkacem and Amedy Coulibaly, who killed four French Jews in a kosher supermarket in Paris, Mr. Abaaoud, accused of being the ringleader of the foiled Belgian plot, also got into trouble with the law and spent time in prison, reportedly for theft, before he took up jihad.

"He was radicalized in prison at Saint Gilles," Mustafa Er, an aide to the Molenbeek mayor, said, referring to a jail in southern Brussels.

In Molenbeek, Ms. Schepmans, the mayor, said the authorities have good relations with the district's biggest mosque, Al Khalil, but has little or no contact with smaller mosques, some of which "are more or less closed."

More worrisome, she added, "are the meeting places we don't know about that operate in the shadows."

She played down the role of religion in the radicalization of a small but dangerous minority, blaming instead the "social networks" of young men whose ties of friendship and then a shared belief in jihad are forged mostly on the street.

"All these people could just as easily have tumbled into criminality" instead of jihadism, the mayor said.

Yasmina Abaaoud, Mr. Abaaoud's older sister, a professional woman who does not wear a veil and now lives in a more upscale area of Brussels, said neither of the brothers who went to Syria ever showed a zealous interest in religion before their departure. "They did not even go to the mosque," she said.

Nor were they from a particularly disadvantaged background. Their father owned a shop and lived with his wife and six children in an apartment on Rue de l'Avenir -- Future Street -- in one of Molenbeek's better neighborhoods, near a canal that separates Molenbeek from a trendy Brussels district of bars and restaurants.

According to a report this week in La Capitale newspaper, the older brother spent at least one year at Collège Saint-Pierre, a well-regarded Catholic school in the wealthy district of Uccle. The school declined to comment.

Belgian prosecutors have not publicly identified Mr. Abaaoud as a suspect in a foiled plot, one of whose main targets was the Molenbeek police station. But officials in Molenbeek described him as the "presumed mastermind" behind a thwarted operation involving several jihadists who had returned from Syria. A senior United States intelligence official, speaking in Washington, said analysts there agreed.

The Belgian news media reported Mr. Abaaoud had been tracked to Turkey and Greece and had communicated by telephone with several of those arrested or killed last week, speaking in coded language investigators interpreted as instructions for a terrorist operation.

The whereabouts of Mr. Abaaoud, also known as Abou Omar Soussi, is not known. His sister Yasmina said the family received calls last fall from Syria saying he had become a "martyr," meaning he had been killed in battle. She said the family has not heard from him or the younger brother, now 14, since.

But investigators now believe the "martyr" report was a ruse to try to throw Western intelligence services off his scent so that he could try to re-enter Europe.

At the time of his reported death he was perhaps Belgium's most notorious jihadist fighter, having appeared in a video made early last year near Hraytan in northern Syria that showed him at the wheel of a Dodge pickup pulling corpses across a field.

In a later video message filmed in Syria, Mr. Abaaoud, using the name Abou Omar el-Belgiki, meaning "the Belgian," urged fellow Muslims to follow him to Syria to wage armed jihad, promising delights they could never have at home.

"While living in Europe, I never ate food like I have eaten here," he said, speaking against the crackle of gunfire as he crouched behind sandbags. I have entered into villas and palaces that, praise be to God, have, through the will of God, been provided for us here."

His main recruiting pitch, however, was an appeal to young Muslims' feelings of exclusion from the mainstream and rage at the treatment of Muslims.

"Are you satisfied with the life you lead, a humiliating life, whether you are in Europe, in Africa, in Arab countries or in America? Are you satisfied with this life, with this life of humiliation?"

Only violent jihad, he continued, could restore their pride and honor. "You will find this only in your religion, only in jihad," he said. "Is there anything better than jihad or a martyr?"

--James Kanter contributed reporting from Brussels, and Eric Schmitt from Washington

RETURN TO TOP

16. Army chief takes axe to 'bloated' top brass
Huge cuts aim to create more professional force; Chief will cut the top brass by a third
The Times (UK), Jan. 24, Pg. 1 | Deborah Haynes

Army top brass will be reduced by up to a third under the most significant reform of senior command in a century, The Times can reveal.

Plans by General Sir Nicholas Carter, the new head of the army, to make the force more professional and reduce bloated bureaucracy mean that many of Britain's 500 colonels and 200 brigadiers and generals will be cut.

The move will ensure that the army, which is shrinking to 82,000 from 102,000 five years ago, is less top-heavy, like its United States counterpart. The 500,000-strong US army has about 310 officers ranked brigadier-general and above.

The last time that the army sought to make its officers more professional was in 1904, when the general staff, comprising everyone from the rank of full colonel and above, was created.

General Carter wants to stop the rise of "yes men", who are rewarded for conforming rather than daring to tell their military and political masters uncomfortable truths, several sources said. Parts of the force are thought at present to operate like a "self-licking lollipop", with officers and civil servants generating work for the sake of it.

The general is also seeking to break a culture of loyalty to regiments that prompts some senior officers to put the interests of their "tribe" before those of the wider force, the senior defence sources and Whitehall insiders said.

The changes, which come after a review of Ministry of Defence bureaucracy initiated by Liam Fox when he was defence secretary in 2011, will be implemented from April. The so-called command review aims to:

- Create a cohort of more professional senior officers trained to be loyal to the army rather than to their regiment.

- End obligatory two-year job rotations — a career path that puts "amateurs" in charge of specialist roles rather than allowing them to develop specialist knowledge.

- Allow career breaks for child-rearing that do not affect promotion prospects. Female officers are penalised by a promotion system that requires certain qualifications at the age when many want to start a family.

- Introduce performance reviews with input from subordinates as well as peers to give brutally honest feedback.

The plans have been set out after decades of flawed leadership in the army and the wider armed forces, because of an institutional malaise in which commanders are rarely held to account, according to more than a dozen former senior and more junior officers interviewed by The Times.

They added that bureaucracy takes precedence over common sense and people are not encouraged to take risks.

"This should mean we have far more truth spoken to power," a senior defence official said. Another added: "What you do is empower junior people to be more prominent in the decision-making process."

This has begun. For the first time, the opinion of majors was requested at an annual chief of the general staff conference this month. "It is the revolution," a third defence official said.

The Carter review will make a clear distinction between senior officers in charge of present operations and those thinking about future challenges.

Two operational commands will be created, one focused on ensuring that troops are ready for action and the other to be in charge of support functions, such as personnel.

The role of adjutant-general will be folded into a new post of vice-chief of the general staff, who will be asked to think strategically about the future.

The link between salary and promotion will be broken, defence sources said. At present, an officer in a specialist role, such as equipment procurement, has to move out of the job to be promoted and receive a pay rise.

The army is also looking at interviewing officers for promotions rather than continuing a process in which a board of commanders makes appointments. There will also be the possibility for members of industry to join the general staff. The renewed general staff will be based at the army's Andover headquarters.

One former senior officer warned that wider reform would be needed to solve the problem of weak leadership across defence. "The [army] may have improved itself, but it won't make any difference if it isn't put in an improved centre or joint arrangement," General Sir Rupert Smith said.

Asked about the Command Review, a spokesman for the army said: "It builds on the delegated model that defence has implemented as a result of Lord Levene's report on defence reforms. It will ensure that the army's command structure and its staff are best placed to meet future challenges in an agile, imaginative and effective manner."

RETURN TO TOP

ASIA/PACIFIC

17. Obama heads to India to revive Asia 'pivot' policy

With no key decisions expected, he plans to focus on talks with the new prime minister
Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A3 | Christi Parsons and Shashank Bengali

Just two months after his last trip to Asia, President Obama left Saturday for a three-day visit to India that includes no world summits, no major decisions to make and a relaxed schedule designed mainly to give plenty of chances for dinner and conversation with the country's popular new prime minister.

The India itinerary, unusual for the normally frenetic White House, is meant to drive home a message about Obama's intentions for his foreign policy in the last two years of his presidency: His repeatedly delayed "pivot to Asia," a reorientation of policy priorities and military and diplomatic interests, is finally happening.

"He wants people to realize this is an important commitment," said one advisor familiar with the plans.

The White House announced the strategic rebalance in 2011 when it foresaw the end of large troop deployments in the Middle East. The renewed emphasis on U.S. engagement in Asia intended to cultivate trade and counteract the territorial ambitions of China.

The strategy was put on hold as the Obama administration dealt with urgent problems elsewhere, including the rise of Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria and Russia-fueled unrest in Ukraine. The cancellation of a 2013 trip to Asia because of a budget crisis in Washington also left allies on the continent questioning the depth of the American commitment to the region.

Obama tried to reassure them during two long rounds of summits in Asia in 2014. This trip is meant to further deliver on that promise.

"He's not just checking a box," the advisor said.

In a series of closed-door meetings, Obama will discuss with Prime Minister Narendra Modi their countries' shared security arrangements, perhaps working out a renewal of the expiring 10-year defense framework, and attempt to make progress on climate and nuclear goals that could eventually lead to breakthroughs.

The trip will also include several cultural stops. Obama will visit the memorial to Mohandas Gandhi in New Delhi and will join Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to see a local performance. Obama also had planned to visit the Taj Mahal but canceled that stop and will instead fly to Saudi Arabia to pay his respects to the family of the late King Abdullah.

The trip's impetus, itself highly symbolic, sets it apart from other Obama journeys, which are typically loaded with high-impact meetings with little time for leisurely cultural observances.

On Monday, Obama is scheduled to sit in public for an hours-long parade honoring Republic Day, the anniversary of India's constitution, which features a long procession of military bands, horses, camels, floral displays and floats. The request to participate came personally from Modi, and Obama, who barely sat still for his own inaugural parades, somewhat surprisingly said yes.

Also notable is that the respect-paying events make up the bulk of the schedule after the one-on-one meetings are out of the way.

First Lady Michelle Obama is making a rare trip away from her daughters while school is in session to participate in a formal state dinner and other ceremonial events with the president.

Despite some rockiness in relations between the two countries, analysts say, the two leaders are looking to find common ground.

"There have been concerns about what happened to the pivot," said Tanvi Madan, director of the India Project at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "And there was concern about India's role in it. ... But both are on the same page and don't want to see China be the hegemon in Asia and the U.S. to have a minimum role. They do agree on that."

A number of senior U.S. officials have visited India in recent weeks to pave the way for Obama's trip, including Secretary of State John F. Kerry, who attended a major business convention in Modi's home state of Gujarat this month.

Indian leaders are hopeful that the U.S. will agree to greater technology sharing in the defense industry, where Indian manufacturers have long lagged, and to begin joint production of unarmed surveillance drones.

Defense contractor Lockheed Martin and the Indian manufacturer Tata are already jointly producing a limited number of C-130 cargo planes for the Indian military, but New Delhi wants the U.S. to share more advanced technology so India can produce more of the aircraft's systems domestically.

"India doesn't want this to remain strictly a buyer-seller relationship," said Sameer Patil, a security analyst at Gateway House, a Mumbai think tank. "It's about getting access to that technology."

The joint statement that came out of the last Modi-Obama meeting, in Washington in September, underscored both nations' concern about Islamist extremism, an area that analysts say could draw the U.S. and India closer together. Al Qaeda recently announced a new franchise to carry out attacks in South Asia, and a number of young Indian Muslims in recent months have been found to have traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside Islamic State.

Another area in which analysts predict progress is nuclear cooperation, which has stalled since the two countries signed a landmark civil-nuclear agreement a decade ago.

The U.S. has stayed away from India's nuclear sector since Parliament passed a law in 2010 that subjects companies to unlimited liability in case of a nuclear accident.

Indian and U.S. nuclear negotiators have met three times since September in an effort to find a compromise that would allow U.S. involvement, perhaps through an insurance pool that limits companies' liability. Experts say breaking the nuclear logjam is urgent because it could help India reduce its reliance on fossil fuels for energy.

The landmark carbon emissions reduction pact between the U.S. and China late last year raised hope that India, which gets 80% of its domestic energy from coal, would also agree to reduce emissions. But Indian officials have signaled that they will not do anything to slow economic growth, placing the priority on development over protecting the environment.

Advisors to Obama say they're not expecting landmark achievements out of this visit, the kind that usually mark his more businesslike overseas trips.

Instead, they're hoping to make progress that will be more tangibly realized later and to build on a budding relationship between two countries that have more in common than recent relations might suggest.

"It's long been discussed that as two very large economies and the world's two largest democracies, there's extraordinary potential in this relationship," said Ben Rhodes, deputy national security advisor to Obama. "What we want to do is turn that potential into concrete benefits for both of our peoples."

--Parsons reported from Washington and Bengali from Mumbai

RETURN TO TOP

CONGRESS

18. Atop perch, McCain primed to push hawkish plan
Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A7 | Missy Ryan

In May 2013, Sen. John McCain caused a stir when he took the risky step of venturing briefly into war-torn Syria to meet with opposition leaders whom he and many other Western backers considered the best hope for toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Nearly two years later, 12 of the 15 Syrian commanders McCain met on the trip are dead, proof in the senator's eyes of President Obama's failed approach to the conflict spreading across the Middle East.

Now, as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain has the chance to amplify his critique of Obama's handling of Iraq and Syria and, by doing so, test the panel's influence over military policy and operations.

"We are probably in the most serious period of turmoil in our lifetime," said the 78-year-old Republican from Arizona, whose control of the committee is the culmination of decades of tenacious advocacy for a muscular foreign policy. "Everything I've predicted, unfortunately, has come true, whether it be in Iraq or whether it be Syria."

McCain, speaking in a recent interview, sees no shortage of defects in the foreign policy record of the man who edged him out in 2008 to become commander in chief. Beyond the Middle East, McCain has characterized Obama's response to the conflicts in Ukraine and Afghanistan as weak and inadequate.

Iraq is a particularly compelling cause for McCain, a proponent of President George W. Bush's troop surge during the last war there. Today, McCain argues that Obama's withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 set the stage for Islamic State militants to take over much of the country in 2014.

"We've got thousands of foreigners over there in the largest caliphate in history," he said. Despite months of airstrikes by the United States and its allies against the group in Iraq and Syria, McCain said, "they're not losing."

In recent months, the senator has advocated expanding the U.S. force in Iraq, from about 2,300 now to 10,000 to better help Iraqis combat the Islamic State. He and Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), whom McCain is urging to

run for president in 2016, also are calling for U.S. service members, mostly confined to bases and headquarters, to be sent closer to the front lines to direct airstrikes or take other steps to aid local troops struggling to expel the well-armed militant group.

The lawmakers want to establish safe zones or no-fly zones in neighboring Syria and expand aid for moderate Syrian rebels to help them fight back against Assad, who appears buoyed by the months of U.S. and allied strikes against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Obama has ruled out sending troops back into combat, but U.S. service members are inching closer to the fight as they begin their renewed mission in Iraq. Military leaders such as Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have suggested they might recommend that U.S. troops take on expanded activities as the battle for Iraq unfolds.

From his new pulpit, McCain probably will attempt to tease out hints of such recommendations from uniformed officials who appear before the committee in coming months. As Armed Services chairman, he controls the pace and topics of oversight hearings and will determine which witnesses provide their views.

"That's a huge arrow in his quiver he didn't have before," said Shawn Brimley, a former Pentagon and White House official who is at the Center for a New American Security. "There will be a heck of a lot attention on current dynamics in the Middle East."

Perhaps even more significant, McCain will be able to shape the annual defense authorization bill. The measure - which can run hundreds of pages and contains provisions on items as varied as overseas operations and the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba - is one of the few pieces of major legislation that passes reliably each year.

In this year's bill, for example, lawmakers authorized the administration to start a program to train moderate Syrian rebels to fight the Islamic State.

McCain's staff will lead the drafting of the Senate bill, effectively setting the parameters for subsequent debate among lawmakers.

"He's acutely aware of all the advantages that the chairman has, and I expect he will use them to the full," Andrew Philip Hunter, a former Pentagon official now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said of McCain.

McCain thinks that recent events such as the Islamic State's beheading of Western hostages and the attacks in Paris have increased support for a muscular response to extremism overseas. But support for a major American military return to the Middle East appears limited, even within a Republican Party that is deeply divided on foreign policy issues.

Although Congress controls the Pentagon's purse strings, that power appears most effective in constraining military action rather than compelling it. And despite forceful advocacy from McCain and others, there appears to be little appetite in the White House to expand the military mission against the Islamic State, let alone pick a fight with the Assad regime.

As McCain noted wryly, even a powerful Armed Services chairman can exercise only limited influence over military operations that are given ultimate approval by the president.

"By having this position, I am able then to, I think, contribute to our nation's defense in a way which otherwise would not be possible - particularly since I am obviously not the choice of the American people to be their commander in chief," he said.

RETURN TO TOP

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

19. Closing Gitmo 'Going To Be Very Difficult,' Hagel Says

NPR.org (Power Centers), Jan. 24 | Arnie Seipel and Steve Inskeep

President Obama wants to close the prison at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay before leaving office. But his departing defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, told NPR News the job is "going to be very difficult" to complete in that time.

Hagel made that remark in an exit interview Friday, one of only a handful he granted as he prepared to vacate his expansive office at the Pentagon. The interview will air Monday on Morning Edition.

His office looks across the Potomac toward the Capitol – where Hagel once served as a Republican senator – and President Obama's White House, which Hagel served for a surprisingly short time.

Hagel's resignation, never fully explained in public, was privately blamed on a variety of factors – one of them being White House frustration with his handling of Guantanamo. No detainee could be transferred out of the prison until Hagel certified that the prisoner would be placed in some other situation where he would not pose a threat to the United States. This was not easy to do.

In the NPR interview, Hagel said that transferring any detainee required action from many parts of the federal government. Diplomats, for example, had to find a country willing to receive each detainee, since there is no political appetite to allow them into the United States. Hagel added that he had a duty not to formally certify that any detainee could leave until there had been "substantial mitigation of risk of these individuals returning to the battlefield to threaten the United States or our people or our allies."

"Has there been a slowing of that [process], which hasn't always made me popular in some quarters? Yes," Hagel said.

"I've made that very clear to the president and to everyone, to the Congress: If it's my responsibility by law, which it is as secretary of defense, then I will do everything I can because the American people rely on that."

When Obama took office in January 2009, he signed an order to close the prison by the end of that year. At the time, there were more than 240 detainees at Guantanamo Bay. By the time Hagel became defense secretary in 2013, 166 detainees remained inside the facility that was supposed to have closed years before. During his tenure Hagel has signed orders to transfer 44 detainees, many of them in recent months.

That was enough for President Obama to claim in his recent State of the Union speech that half the detainees were gone. But 122 remain. They remain, Hagel noted, precisely because they have been the most difficult detainees to place elsewhere.

Can Obama keep his revised promise to close the Guantanamo facility before leaving office? "It's going to be very difficult," Hagel said, "especially if the Congress further restricts where these last 122 detainees go." Congress has already barred them from being sent to the United States.

RETURN TO TOP

20. High-value Guantanamo detainees call home for first time in nearly a decade
U.S. officials impose tight security limitations on prisoners' video calls
Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A5 | Julie Tate and Missy Ryan

For almost a decade, the 15 detainees considered to be the most dangerous at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been locked in a special top-security facility, deprived of some of the privileges granted to other prisoners, such as communal living, live television and periodic calls with their families.

Now, as the Pentagon moves to improve prisoner conditions, officials have allowed several "high-value" inmates to make Skype-like video calls and speak with their families for the first time since they were brought to Guantanamo Bay from secret CIA prisons overseas.

Officials have imposed strict security restrictions on the calls, monitoring both sides' statements to ensure no classified information is divulged, making for a disruptive experience that in one case stretched a 30-minute conversation to four hours.

The tightly controlled concession reflects not only ongoing sensitivity about information the prisoners, some of them charged with plotting the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, might divulge, but also unresolved disputes about the detainees' most basic rights.

Anna Nelson, a spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said the ICRC facilitated video conversations for two detainees on Jan. 17 and 18.

"We believe that in situations of prolonged detention, family contact enables detainees to maintain their sense of human dignity," Nelson said.

A U.S. defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss prison operations, confirmed the calls took place in "near real time" and were subject to security screening.

"We have concluded that increasing family contact for the High Value Detainees can be done in a manner that is consistent with both humanitarian and security interests," Lt. Col. Myles Caggins III, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement. He said Pentagon officials now planned to expand the calls to the 13 remaining high- value detainees.

Navy Cmdr. Patrick Flor, a military defense attorney for Abu Faraj al-Libi, one of the high-value detainees, said his client had spoken with his family in Tripoli, Libya, in the past week. He said the call was disrupted by audio problems, which may have resulted from the screening of Libi's statements.

"Do I think this is a good thing?" Flor asked. "My guy has been locked up since 2005 at Guantanamo. He has had no direct contact with his family," and has a daughter he has never even seen, he said.

Libi, who provided the United States with information that ultimately helped locate al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan, has not been charged with a crime.

Among the other prisoners at Camp 7, the maximum-security detention area that is so secret that its location is classified, are Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the self-proclaimed mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Saudi of Yemeni descent who could receive the death penalty for his alleged role in the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

Both men were subjected to waterboarding and "rectal feeding" during their CIA detention and were brought, along with a dozen other prisoners held by the spy agency, to Guantanamo Bay in 2006.

Navy Cmdr. Brian Mizer, Nashiri's lead military attorney, said his client had also made a call to his family in Saudi Arabia.

"Allowing Abdul Rahim to speak with his family was, I am sure, uplifting for both him and his family," said Richard Kammen, a civilian attorney for Nashiri. "Because he suffers chronic complex PTSD from the physical, sexual and psychological torture inflicted upon him by the United States, allowing him to make this call is a minor but appropriate part of his medical care."

Mizer said he expected the call was "overwhelming" for Nashiri and family members. "Mr. Nashiri hasn't seen his family in 12 years - no voice contact," he said. "That circumstance happening in an American prison or a [prisoner of war] setting is simply unfathomable."

Walter Ruiz, a defense attorney for Mustafa al-Hawsawi, a Saudi man also being tried for involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks, said Hawsawi's defense team also requested that its client be allowed to speak with his family.

"International humanitarian law requires the government to provide law of war detainees with those standards," including family communication, Ruiz said. "To not do [so] is considered to be punishment and in this case would be illegal punishment prior to being found guilty."

Defense attorneys had long appealed to military authorities to permit such calls. Prisoners in Guantanamo's general population have been able to make land-line audio calls since April 2008, the ICRC said, and video calls began in September 2009.

Previously, high-value detainees were only allowed to write and receive letters transmitted by the ICRC. Last August, prison officials began allowing them to record video messages about family topics, which were then shared with relatives. All communication is screened by government officials.

Navy Capt. Tom Gresback, a military spokesman at Guantanamo, said differences in conditions for prisoners at Camp 7 and other detainees were "very minimal."

"All detainees held at the detention facility at Guantanamo are treated in accordance of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions," Gresback said, referring to international rules governing treatment of people during armed conflict.

Defense attorneys said that security restrictions have also hampered the recorded video communication.

Air Force Capt. Michael Schwartz, a military lawyer for Waleed bin Attash, also charged in the 9/11 attacks, said his client recorded a video for his family in November. A screening of the video was offered to his family in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, but only five people - chosen by the United States - were permitted to watch it. Schwartz said the Attash family declined to watch the video because of those restrictions.

Mohammed, likewise, was offered a chance to participate in recording a message to his family, but he ultimately declined because of viewing restrictions, said David Nevin, his civilian lawyer.

--Adam Goldman contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

MARINE CORPS

21. Marines to kick off month-long exercise with Japan
MarineCorpsTimes.com, Jan. 24 | Joshua Stewart

On Monday, Marines will begin a month-long exercise in Southern California with Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force. The event is designed to test Japan's command and control capabilities while improving one of the strongest military relationships in the Pacific.

The annual exercise, dubbed Iron Fist, involves just over 250 Japanese troops. About 700 Marines from Combat Logistics Battalion 13 and 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines — both based at Camp Pendleton, California — will also participate. The exercise doesn't have a dedicated air combat element, but will involve aircraft from nearby units, said 2nd Lt. Francheska Soto, a spokeswoman for the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

This year Japan will have its biggest and most-advanced command and control presence in exercise since Iron Fist started 10 years ago, Soto said.

"In the past, the Japanese haven't been able to match the command and control portion, so they used the Marine Corps portion and participated in the offshooting exercise. But this year they're matching the Marine Corps control center," she said.

They'll be more involved in the planning and execution of the exercises events than in previous years, she said.

By the time Iron Fist concludes on Feb. 27, the two forces will participate in amphibious reconnaissance missions, advanced marksmanship drills, fire support exercises and forward observer training. Japan is particularly interested in Skysat, a system that puts communication transmission devices aloft via balloon, Soto said.

"It provides extensive range," she said.

The event will use facilities at Camp Pendleton and Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, California; and San Clemente Island.

RETURN TO TOP

TRANSCOM

22. Anti-Ebola module is unveiled

Scott Air Force Base introduces self-contained modules that isolate patients while they're being airlifted to hospitals

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Jan. 24, Pg. A1 | Nancy Cambria

SCOTT AIR FORCE BASE -- For years, airborne diseases such as bird flu and SARS have threatened a global pandemic. Books have been written and popular movies made on the potential devastation of an outbreak.

But it wasn't until last year when Ebola, a fluid-born disease, trickled out of West Africa into the United States and other parts of the world that fear about containing the disease became very real to Americans.

On Friday, the U.S. Department of Defense announced a locally developed containment system at Scott Air Force Base to help military personnel safely airlift multiple patients with both airborne and fluid-borne diseases to U.S. hospitals.

Gen. Paul Selva, commander of the U.S. Transportation Command Unit, or USTRANSCOM, said the system would increase the military's continued success at reducing fatalities in the field by better enabling infected military and aid workers to get to appropriate hospitals.

USTRANSCOM, based out of Scott Air Force Base, manages global air, land and sea transportation for the Department of Defense.

"On humanitarian missions you now have the capability to bring back large numbers of people if they get sick," said Maj. Gen. Scott Hanson, director of operations for the Air Force's Air Mobility Command.

The Transport Isolation System was put on display Friday inside a hangar at the base for visitors to walk through and ask questions.

It was developed by Production Products Inc., a minority-owned contractor based in north St. Louis County, at a cost of $7 million — which covers future orders. Designed and tested quickly over four months last summer and fall, the new system can be fully loaded via pallets onto C-17 cargo planes and C-130 airlifters.

Resembling a slightly smaller set of plastic enclosed boxcars, it creates a chain of fully sealed modular treatment rooms measuring about 9 by 7½ feet. Medical staff are able to safely enter and exit the system through a decontamination pod while simultaneously keeping other aircraft personnel, passengers and cargo safe.

Each pod can carry multiple patients, and pods can be added on to the system depending on the size of the aircraft.

Crews of technicians, nurses and physicians have already been trained to use the modular system in aeromedical evacuations.

A group from the 375th Unit of the Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron gathered at the display said they were fully confident in the system to protect them and others from contamination. They noted that intensive instruction was given on the use of medical suits to prevent transmission.

In addition to two of the three test models already constructed, the Department of Defense plans to order 22 more to be placed for deployment at bases in East and West Coast locations in March.

Barry Corona, president of Production Products, likened the modular system to a fully contained ambulance that can be loaded onto a plane.

He said the 38-year-old company was proud of the turnaround on the system, which under less pressing circumstances would have taken two years to develop.

The private contracting firm traditionally develops structures to provide military personnel refuge from outside chemical and biological attacks. The new system turns the technology inside-out to protect the outside world. Corona said the system was critical to Americans and aid workers infected overseas.

"If you don't get them back to hospitals here, they just don't survive," he said.

RETURN TO TOP

VETERANS

23. River Rats, still healing, gather in Vegas near 40th anniversary of Vietnam War
Las Vegas Review-Journal, Jan. 25, Pg. A1 | Keith Rogers

They huddled at a Las Vegas resort to reflect on what their minds can't erase nearly 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War.

About 25 River Rats — men who wore black berets in the brown-water Navy and fired machine guns from fast-moving boats and low-flying helicopters over the Mekong River delta — reunited last week for the 12th time since the war ended April 30, 1975.

"We're still in the healing process in many ways. Vietnam has not left us," said co-organizer, author and river patrol boat veteran Ralph Christopher, of Las Vegas. At 64, he is the youngest of the group. "The reunion is really about helping my guys come back together."

In 1970 alone, five years before South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, fell to communist North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, nearly 100 sailors of the brown-water Navy were killed in action or died of wounds. They were among more than 2,570 Navy war dead from 1960 until 1975, according to the group's historian, retired Chief Warrant Officer-3 Ralph J. Fries.

One who survived a 1966 River Patrol Force battle, Boatswain's Mate 1st Class James Elliott Williams, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in a battle to defeat Viet Cong guerrillas.

Fighting the Vietnam War "was 10 minutes of pure hell; an hour of frustration; and the rest of your day was spent wondering, curious as to whether or not you were going to be alive 24 hours from now," said veteran Petty Officer 1st Class George Wendell, 65, of Las Vegas.

"Sixteen of us trained together as a team. In a year's time, four of us returned home, two walking, two in a chair," Wendell said. "The war itself was very ugly. But the country and the people are very beautiful, very open, very friendly."

Nevertheless, he said, "I won't ever go back there, because there are too many memories there, too many bad memories."

Christopher, who has returned twice to Vietnam, said, "We weren't fighting for President Johnson, President Nixon, Mom, apple pie. We were fighting for the guy on the left and the guy on the right for the right to return home someday, go back to school and pick up our lives.

"We were the group that didn't run and burn our draft cards. We answered the call."

CAMBODIA AND KENT STATE

Christopher, who manned .50-caliber machine guns, endured four deployments from 1967 to 1970. He was one of the River Patrol "Gamewardens" in Task Force-116. They patrolled rivers and canals in 31-foot fiberglass boats to assist the U.S. Army in severing supply lines and intercepting Viet Cong scouts and North Vietnam Army infiltrators along a 200-mile stretch of the Cambodian border.

"There would be hundreds of little boats out there manning .50s, hiding in the bushes, and here comes the NVA down the trail, 1,000-strong carrying guns and arms. They had to get by us. We were the first to greet them.

"Some nights they made it. Some nights they didn't. They were warriors. I didn't like their politics but they didn't cry. They fought and died like men. I think many of them were young like us," Christopher said Wednesday, where the River Rats gathered in suites at The Orleans.

It was the Cambodia Incursion, or counterinsurgency campaign, that sparked protests that led to the Ohio National Guard shootings of four anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University.

"I've always felt that they did not truly understand what the mission was," he said about the protesters. "They confused us with invading a country illegally, when the truth was the Cambodians were begging us to come in and help them."

For months the River Rats had watched bodies float down the Mekong River. "There was a genocide going on in Cambodia in mid-'70, and they were killing these civilians and throwing them in the river."

The brown-water Navy with its heavily armed boats and Seawolf helicopters "saved a lot of lives," Christopher said. "We pulled 70,000 refugees out of Cambodia and housed them on the side of the river in Vietnam at a Red Cross camp."

Meanwhile, the role of U.S. forces shifted to training the South Vietnamese to defend themselves. During the 1970 campaign, 300 American lives were lost, but the South Vietnamese military death toll was 10,000.

"We lost no war," Christopher said. "We turned over our war machines, our boats, and we were told to let them take the lead. ... You can't count 1,000 Marines at the embassy or a couple thousand advisers as a major force when you're taking on half a million communist troops.

"So we weren't there in '75. So the idea that we lost some war, it's like saying, 'I lost Gettysburg.' I wasn't there," he said. "I had come home. All my buddies had come home. We were sitting in front of the TV like everybody else when we watched the tanks roll down to the embassy."

SWIFT BOAT SAILORS, SEAWOLF SHOOTERS

Gary Ely, 66, of Lakeside, Calif., turned 21 during his tour from January 1970 through August 1971.

Trained as a Navy structural aircraft mechanic from Des Moines, Iowa, he became a gunner for a helicopter attack squadron. He manned .50- and .60-caliber machine guns, and door-mounted mini-guns.

"Shooting a hand-held machine gun out the door of a helicopter is pretty exciting no matter what you're shooting at. It was even more exciting when you're helping the guys on the ground eradicate the enemy," he said.

Regardless of opinions on winning the war, Ely said, "All I know is a lot of guys came home after the war, and some of them wouldn't have if I hadn't done my job over there.

"For me it was a job I did while I was in the service. I don't carry any baggage with it right now. I didn't carry too much baggage back then."

He views the 40th anniversary as "an opportunity to look back over my shoulder."

"I take quite a bit of pride in the fact that I did fight in that war even though it was as unpopular as it was."

Part of their job was covering for swift boats when they came under attack on missions to transport Navy SEALs and hunt down enemy soldiers lurking along the banks.

Swift boats were 50-foot long, 12-foot-wide mini battleships made of aluminum, one-fourth-inch-thick, that could run rivers in the Mekong Delta at 30 mph.

James Steffes, 73, a retired engineman chief from Sun City, Calif. — whose hometown is St. Cloud, Minn. — was a senior petty officer, second in command on four boats during the war. He was stationed in Hawaii when Saigon fell.

"It was like somebody hit me between the eyes," he said, adding, "It seems like winning wars is no longer an American dream.

"When you talk about the 40th anniversary, at the time were the previous history was World War II, which (we) won; Korea, which (we) pretty much defeated them, and they didn't surrender," Steffes said.

"So Vietnam was really the first one that we fought for years and years and years, and then kind of walked away and it was fought in an ally's country against a guerrilla war," he said.

"So as upset as we felt about it, if you look back on those 40 years now, they've done the same thing in Afghanistan, and they've done the same thing in Iraq and other parts around the world where they don't want to win any more."

Steffes, a member of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, took issue with former Navy officer and now Secretary of State John Kerry when he ran for president of the United States.

"We objected to the fact that he said out of the 2½ million people who served in Vietnam all of us were baby killers and burning crops and stuff like that," he said. "I never saw any of those things. His idea of raping and pillaging the land like Genghis Khan, it just didn't happen."

Said Wendell, a swift boat engineman: "I was disappointed then, and I'm still very disappointed today in the way our government handled the situation.

"It would have taken just one major, concentrated military push, and it wouldn't have been a U.S. surrender and a South Vietnamese surrender. It would have been North Vietnam surrendering. But politicians and egotists back here in the states changed all of that."

Tom Restemayer, 67, of Camano Island, Wash., enlisted at 17 out of Cavalier, N.D. He earned two Purple Heart medals as a gunner's mate 3rd class.

A message written on the back of his shirt sums up his thoughts: "Vietnam. We were winning when I left."

"I just tell people we didn't lose the war. Our politicians lost that war, because they were afraid of the protesters. They didn't care about the enemy," Restemayer said.

GOOD TIMES AND BAD

More than 30 sailors in Restemayer's unit lost their lives battling for control of the Vam Co Dong River.

"Adrenaline does strange things to you," he said. "Once you start getting shot at, that adrenaline kicks in and all you're thinking about is defending your boys."

In one nighttime battle with the patrol boat anchored, tracer bullet fire erupted from both banks.

"You could read a book by the tracers," he said. "I finally ran out of bullets."

He reached on the deck and scrounged up one belt that had five rounds left to take out the last threat from an enemy Sampan.

River patrols often reached out to South Vietnamese fishermen and farmers to win their hearts and minds by giving them fishing gear and sacks of rice and potatoes and ensure their goods got to the free market rather than face the wrath of communism.

Many Vietnamese have since thanked them for saving life and property.

Christopher was sitting on a grenade box listening to Grand Funk Railroad play "I'm Your Captain" on his 8-track player, when he learned he was going home.

With the sun beating down, the dress code meant it was OK to wear shorts and sandals with a holstered .45-caliber pistol. "We looked like McHale's Navy," he said, referring to the 1960s TV comedy about a World War II Navy PT boat crew.

In his 2005 book, "River Rats," Christopher recalled his mixed emotions, like he had just hit a royal flush but couldn't tell anybody because he felt bad about buddies he was leaving behind.

"Most of us just wanted to return home and pick up our lives and go to school on the GI Bill. However, I am very proud of the River Rats and it was my honor to try and bring their stories to the world," he said.

RETURN TO TOP

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

24. Shifting Realities in Syria
New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. SR12 | Editorial

As recently as October, Secretary of State John Kerry argued that there will never be peace in Syria as long as President Bashar al-Assad "remains the focus of power" there. Even now, American officials continue to insist that any lasting political solution will require Mr. Assad's exit. But the unsettling truth is that the brutal dictator is still clinging to power and the United States and its allies are going to have to live with him, at least for now.

Mr. Kerry seemed tacitly to acknowledge as much recently when he urged Mr. Assad to change his policies, while omitting the usual call for him to leave office.

In the last year, the situation in Syria has changed quickly and dramatically. The Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, now controls about half the country, while the rebels America counted on to defeat Mr. Assad have become weaker in the face of steady gains by the regime.

There seems no chance that Mr. Assad will leave power voluntarily anytime soon or that he will be forced out by the non-ISIS rebels unless the United States intervenes directly, a course President Obama has rejected. Recent history should humble anyone who would predict the direction of regime change. Except for Tunisia, countries that overthrew their leaders during the 2011 Arab Spring movements have replaced the old dictators with new ones or descended into chaos.

Besides, the greater threat now is not Mr. Assad but the Islamic State, especially if it continues to expand in Syria, entices more foreign fighters into its ranks and uses its territory to launch attacks on the West. A recent study by the RAND Corporation, which does research for the government, says the collapse of the Assad regime, while unlikely now, would be the "worst possible outcome" for American interests -- depriving Syria of its remaining state institutions and creating more space for the Islamic State and other extremists to spread mayhem.

This was not the scenario envisioned in 2011 when Syrians staged peaceful protests against Mr. Assad's autocratic government. President Obama and European leaders called for Mr. Assad to resign and pressured him with

sanctions. The dictator, armed and aided by Russia and Iran, retaliated with his air force and barrel bombs, fueling a civil war in which some 200,000 Syrians have been killed and countless towns destroyed.

As has long been the case, the fighting in Syria raises tough questions and presents the United States with no good options. And Mr. Obama's approach to the conflict remains the most inchoate element of his campaign against the Islamic State. While the Americans and Mr. Assad ostensibly share a common enemy, the two parties are not formally collaborating. Yet American fighter planes regularly invade Syrian airspace to bomb Islamic State targets. If the main threat is the Islamic State and the goal is to defeat it, might the West at some point be forced to work with Mr. Assad?

The administration says it is training Syrian rebels to assist the United States-led air campaign against the Islamic State, but those fighters will not be engaged for another few months and there are serious doubts about whether they can ever be effective. Figuring out Syria's longer-term future is even more complicated. If, as American officials say, the only way to end the civil war and forge a common front against ISIS is some kind of political agreement that includes Russia and Iran, Mr. Assad's major allies, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia, his major opponents, what must Washington do to strengthen its position and shape the outcome?

American officials see an emerging international consensus on the need for a long-term diplomatic solution between Mr. Assad and diverse rebel groups. There is also interest in United Nations-led cease-fires in local communities like Aleppo that might serve as a basis for a broader peace. As The Times has reported, the Russians are trying to bring the two sides into talks later this month, with the apparent aim of a more gradual change in Syria.

But it's unclear how plausible any of the ideas are, and no one seems to have figured out how to tie these disparate pieces into a coherent game plan. That includes the Republicans who control Congress and spend their time railing against Mr. Obama's foreign policy, though they have offered no realistic alternatives. The idea of a capable force of "moderate" Syrians that can overthrow Mr. Assad has proved to be a fantasy, even though politicians like Senator John McCain keep insisting otherwise.

Congress must, of course, have a role in advising how to wage this new war against the Islamic State. But it has shirked its duty, and after months of American military action in Iraq and Syria, it has failed to authorize or even seriously debate how this indefinite war should be conducted.

RETURN TO TOP

25. The Syria conundrum
Los Angeles Times, Jan. 25, Pg. A26 | Doyle McManus

In 2011, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, a mild-mannered diplomat named Robert S. Ford, became the face of American support for the Arab Spring when he boldly visited opponents to the brutal regime of Bashar Assad in the northern city of Hama.

In 2014, Ford quit, saying he could not defend the Obama administration's inconstant support for Syrian rebels. "More hesitation ... [will] simply hasten the day when American forces have to intervene against Al Qaeda in Syria," he warned.

Now, a year later, Ford's warning has come true. U.S. warplanes bomb jihadists in Syria week after week. Northern Syria has become a base for both Islamic State, which invaded Iraq last year, and an Al Qaeda franchise that trains European terrorists.

But Ford thinks U.S. policy has moved backward, not forward. "We're seeing Syria divide into four countries," he told me last week. "and I'm not sure it can be put back together."

It's the most conspicuous failure of U.S. foreign policy today. The Assad regime that President Obama declared dead remains in power, and roughly half its territory is held by jihadists. The moderates the U.S. said it would support are mostly scattered and defeated.

You wouldn't have learned that from Obama's State of the Union speech last week, though. In Obama's telling, Syria is part of a success story.

"In Iraq and Syria, American leadership, including our military power, is stopping [Islamic State's] advance," Obama said. "Instead of getting dragged into another ground war in the Middle East, we are leading a broad coalition ... [and] supporting a moderate opposition in Syria that can help us in this effort."

It's "a smarter kind of American leadership," the president said.

Actually, two American impulses have collided in Syria. One was the desire to help topple a regime that has held power through "murder, hostage-taking, enforced disappearances, torture, rape, sexual violence, use of child soldiers, targeting civilians, and indiscriminate bombing," to quote the State Department.

The other, stronger impulse was to avoid getting entangled in another war -- and that, officials said, has been the most consistent message from Obama and his closest aides.

So even as the administration announced program after program to aid moderate rebels -- from humanitarian aid and "non-lethal supplies" to a not-yet-started plan to train 5,400 rebels a year -- the warning that filtered through the bureaucracy was: It's safer to move slowly than it is to take risks.

"There's never been a great sense of urgency in the administration about doing something big," Ford said. The new training program, he added, is so small that it "has the feel of checking a box."

Meanwhile, the jihadists didn't wait. They collected government aid and private donations from the Arab Gulf states; they bought weapons and trained rebels; and, in November, they overran bases of Harakat Hazm, an armed group the United States was backing, and seized its U.S.-supplied anti-tank missiles. "At that point, our window [for arming rebels] closed," Ford said.

There isn't much appetite in Congress for shipping anti-tank missiles to rebels if the missiles end up in the hands of Al Qaeda affiliates. But that still leaves the United States fighting a war in Syria if it is to "destroy" Islamic State, as Obama has promised.

That goal, if it's real, will require a ground force. U.S. officials have nominated Turkey, or a coalition of Turkey and friendly Arab forces, plus the future Syrian rebels if their U.S. training ever starts. But that's a force that doesn't exist in service of a strategy that hasn't been described.

One thing U.S. officials still insist they won't do is conclude an alliance with Syria's Assad. But they're no longer insisting he needs to step down immediately. They've suggested that the United States could be flexible if Assad's regime entered serious peace talks with the non-jihadist opposition.

"It is time for President Assad [and] the Assad regime to put their people first and to think about the consequences of their actions, which are attracting more and more terrorists to Syria," Secretary of State John F. Kerry said Jan. 14.

If the administration has a diplomatic strategy, it centers on cajoling countries that have influence in Syria -- Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey -- to join in a combined effort to end the conflict. The premise is that those countries fear Islamic State and other jihadists enough to put aside their otherwise deep divisions. But that's a long way from happening too.

Until then, the U.S. strategy boils down to attacking Islamic State from the air, hoping a war of attrition somehow weakens Assad's grip on power, and asking Turkey (and perhaps others) to act on the ground where the United States has been unwilling.

"Our problem is that we don't have much leverage," Ford noted. "We have put very little skin in the game. The Russians and Iranians have put a lot of skin in the game."

And that offers little ground for optimism. The lesson of our misadventure in Syria may be this: A risk-averse foreign policy can keep you out of ground wars -- but it can also keep other goals out of reach too.

RETURN TO TOP

26. To stop the terrorists, take away their hope
Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A21 | Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales (Ret.)

The centerpiece of a national security strategy is to isolate and exploit an enemy's vulnerable "center of gravity." Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian military philosopher and father of modern military theory, defined center of gravity as "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."

Conventional wisdom inside the Pentagon and among defense intellectuals is that the vulnerable center of gravity of today's enemy is its extreme Islamist ideology. Speaking on "Fox News Sunday" after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that the rise in the terrorists' power has been mainly due to the inspiration that comes from an increasingly radical ideology. Thus, most of the Obama administration's "nine lines of effort" to defeat radical Islam are, in fact, non-military actions meant to counter this ideology, such as disrupting the finances of terror groups and disseminating alternative messaging.

But the numerous attacks we have seen around the world suggest that this ideology is not a vulnerable center of gravity, if it ever was. Dedication to an ideological cause does not appear to be in short supply. Likewise, after the Abu Ghraib scandal and 12 years of perceived atrocities against Islam at the Guantanamo Bay prison, the United States long ago lost its ability to effectively fight an ideological war against Islamic terrorism.

Our political masters need to distinguish between ideology and the enemy's true vulnerable center of gravity: hope. The differences are subtle. Hope is the belief that ideology will prevail. Hope drives motivation or, in the

psychologist's jargon, a "response initiation." To the extent that hope is present, a terrorist will translate belief into action. As hope is removed, even the most ideologically attuned enemy will become passive. As Clausewitz advises: Strike the center of gravity and the enemy loses the will to act.

The history of war suggests hope is a fuel that induces young, post-adolescent men to turn ideology into action. And hope rises with the perception of military success.

Confederate soldiers were given hope of eventual victory after the Union debacle at the First Battle of Bull Run. A similar rise of mindless hope occurred among German youth after the fall of Paris in 1940 and, sadly, within the U.S. Army after the fall of Baghdad in 2003.

Hope extends wars and makes them bloodier through the euphoria that comes with a rush to share in the glory. Hope gives young men surety and confidence. It provides a moral sanctuary and is the glue that binds soldiers together in war. Soldiers - and, by extension, terrorists - simply won't fight if there is no hope.

Arab cultures have a history with the mercurial collapse of hope. The huge swings in hope among Arab forces before and after defeats in the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars and the U.S. victory in the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's army in 1991 are instructive. The apathy that followed Osama bin Laden's killing also suggests that terrorists can lose hope after the death of a single icon.

Think of hope as a material formed in a crucible over time by a series of successful terrorist strikes against the West and Western-affiliated countries in the Middle East. Since violent actions filled this crucible, only a violent military counterresponse can crack the crucible and empty it of hope. The object of a campaign against hope is not necessarily to kill in large numbers but rather to find the greatest vulnerability and shatter it dramatically and decisively.

The terrorist's greatest source of hope today comes from Islamic State battlefield successes in Syria and Iraq. A defeat there cracks the crucible. The question is how to do it with enough drama and speed that terrorists the world over lose hope and become passive. From any perspective, the Islamic State enclave in Syria is militarily unassailable. But Iraq is a different story.

A campaign against hope must start from Baghdad and move northward up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Islamic State's vulnerability rests with its disconnected garrisons spotted astride the rivers like a string of pearls. Thanks to U.S. bombing, Islamic State fighters cannot easily move among these enclaves. Thus, a sequence of patient ground assaults against garrisons in cities such as Taji, Hit, Tal Afar and eventually Mosul will create momentum sufficient to push the Islamic State's forces to the Syrian border. These won't be victories so much as public humiliations, the antidote to hope.

Can the Iraqis do it? If so, can they do it before the Islamic State solidifies its grip on the river cities? One thing is certain: The last best hope for a decisive outcome against the hopefulness of these killers rests with the Iraqi army and the Americans who are trying to turn them into a viable fighting force.

--Robert H. Scales, a retired Army major general, is a former commandant of the U.S. Army War College

RETURN TO TOP

27. Prisoners of the Saudis

New York Times, Jan. 25, Pg. SR13 | Ross Douthat

The Western response to the death of Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, king of Saudi Arabia and custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, followed two paths. Along one, various officials and luminaries offered the gestures -- half-mast flags, public obsequies -- expected when a great statesman enters the hereafter. John Kerry described the late monarch as "a man of wisdom and vision" and a "revered leader." Tony Blair called him a "modernizer of his country" and a "staunch advocate of interfaith relations," who was "loved by his people and will be deeply missed."

Along the other path, anyone outside Western officialdom was free to tell the fuller truth: that Abdullah presided over one of the world's most wicked nonpariah states, whose domestic policies are almost cartoonishly repressive and whose international influence has been strikingly malign. His dynasty is founded on gangsterish control over a precious natural resource, sustained by an unholy alliance with a most cruel interpretation of Islam and protected by the United States and its allies out of fear of worse alternatives if it fell.

Was he a "modernizer"? Well, there were gestures, like giving women the vote in elections that don't particularly matter. But Abdullah's most important recent legacy has been counterrevolutionary, in his attempts to rally a kind of axis of authoritarianism against the influence of the Arab Spring.

Did he believe in "interfaith relations"? Sure, so long as the other faiths were safely outside Saudi territory, where religious uniformity is enforced by the police and by the lash.

Will he be "deeply missed"? Well, not by dissidents, Shiites, non-Muslims, protestors in neighboring countries ... and for everyone else, only by comparison with the incompetence or chaos or still greater cruelty that might come next.

But Americans should feel some limited sympathy for the late king, because our relationship with his kingdom has something in common with his own. Like so many despots, Abdullah was to some extent a prisoner of the system he inherited, interested in reform in theory but unable to find the room or take the risks required to see it through. And we in the United States are prisoners as well: handcuffed to Saudi Arabia, bound to its corruptions and repression, with no immediate possibility of escape.

Much of America's post-Cold War policy-making in the Middle East can be understood as a search for a way to slip those cuffs. Three consecutive presidents have tried to reshape the region so that alliances with despotic regimes will no longer seem so inevitable or necessary. And all of them have failed.

For Bill Clinton, solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was supposed to be the catalyst -- in ways never quite elucidated -- for reform and progress in the wider Arab world. For George W. Bush, or at least his ambitious advisers, the invasion of Iraq was supposed to create a brilliant alternative to our Saudi alliance -- a new special Middle Eastern relationship, but with an oil-producing liberal democracy this time.

For President Obama, there have been multiple ideas for how we might, as an administration official put it during our Libya campaign, "realign our interests and our values." The president has tried rhetorical outreach to transcend (or at least obscure) our coziness with tyrants; he tried, in Libya and haltingly in Egypt, to put his administration on the side of the Arab Spring; he and Mr. Kerry have made efforts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; he has sought some kind of realigning deal with that other font of cruelty, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Iran project is ongoing, but so far all these efforts either have led (in the case of our Libyan crusade) to outright chaos, or have seen things cycle back to the same old stalemates, the same morally corrosive status quo.

Here Obama's experiences are of a piece with Bush's, albeit without the same cost in blood and treasure. From Saddam's Iraq to Mubarak's Egypt, from Libya to the West Bank, the last two presidents have repeatedly pulled the curtain back, or had it pulled back for them, on potential alternatives to the kind of realpolitik that binds us to the Saudis, and potential aftermaths to the dynasty's eventual fall. So far, they've found nothing good.

Meanwhile, the Saudis themselves are still there. And since much of what's gone bad now surrounds them -- the Islamic State very much in business in the north, Iranian-backed rebels seizing power in Yemen to the south -- the American interest in the stability of their kingdom, the continuation of the royal family's corrupt and wicked rule, is if anything even stronger than before.

Whatever judgment King Abdullah finds himself facing now, he is at least free of his kingdom, his region and its nightmarish dilemmas.

But not America. A king is dead, but our Saudi nightmare is a long way from being finished.

RETURN TO TOP

28. Nuclear insecurity

Russia's short-sighted decision to terminate cooperation with the United States

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A22 | Editorial

Near the Russian city of Ozersk, about 80 miles south of Yekaterinburg, stands a warehouse like no other. The Fissile Material Storage Facility, with walls 23 feet thick, is a hanger-sized vault to protect fissile materials - highly enriched uranium and plutonium - that could be used for nuclear weapons. The facility was built at a cost of $309 million by the United States in a period of cooperation with Russia to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons materials.

Today, that period is ending. Russia informed U.S. officials in December that it wants to end nuclear security cooperation with the United States. Although anticipated for some time, the decision marks an unfortunate conclusion to an effort that was remarkable in a number of ways.

Created by Congress in 1991 as the Soviet Union was falling apart and championed by then-Sens. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the program extended the hand of a prosperous United States to Russia and other nations that emerged from the Soviet implosion with barely the shirts on their backs but truckloads of fissile material vulnerable to theft and diversion.

Despite decades of mistrust during the Cold War, the Nunn-Lugar program involved cooperation on the most sensitive of projects. Everything from intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to artillery shells filled with deadly chemicals was destroyed and security upgrades were carried out at dozens of facilities. It wasn't charity; the work had security benefits for both nations and the rest of the world. Overall, the program reflected a sense of magnanimity, bipartisanship and purpose in U.S. foreign policy.

After 20 years, Russia has become prosperous enough to pay for its own nuclear security, although it now faces new economic woes. In terminating nuclear cooperation amid the deepening tensions over Russia's aggression in

Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin is peevishly shooting his nation in the foot. Russia confronts serious terrorism threats, and its nuclear security, while improved, is not stellar. Fissile material remains spread out over too many time zones in too many different warehouses. On the opposite page today, Mssrs. Nunn and Lugar call for a "new approach" reflecting a more equal partnership. This is a reasonable goal, but the reality is that the bilateral relationship has soured over Mr. Putin's perfidy and belligerence, creating a new gulf of mistrust.

Importantly, Nunn-Lugar is no longer just about Russia and the former Soviet Union. The programs have been used to get dangerous materials out of Libya and to destroy much of the Syrian chemical weapons stocks; to establish sentinels for biological threats on several continents; and to secure potentially vulnerable civilian nuclear material around the world, among other things. There is no question that the $1.6 billion a year or so spent for this goal has been a bargain. Two decades of operational experience in Nunn-Lugar may also prove valuable should another nuclear-armed nation suddenly collapse. Russia may be withdrawing, but the potential threats aren't going away.

RETURN TO TOP

29. A nuclear rift worth fixing

Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. A23 | Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar

For more than two decades, the United States and Russia partnered to secure and eliminate dangerous nuclear materials - not as a favor to one another but as a common-sense commitment, born of mutual self-interest, to prevent catastrophic nuclear terrorism. The world's two largest nuclear powers repeatedly set aside their political differences to cooperate on nuclear security to ensure that terrorists would not be able to detonate a nuclear bomb in New York, Moscow, Paris, Tel Aviv or elsewhere.

Unfortunately, this common-sense cooperation has become the latest casualty of the spiraling crisis in relations among the United States, Europe and Russia.

In December, Congress voted - for the first time in nearly a quarter-century - to defund U.S. efforts to secure vulnerable nuclear materials in the Russian Federation. Days later, Russian officials, following up on previous signals, informed their U.S. counterparts that Russia was cutting off most aspects of its nuclear security cooperation with the United States. These shortsighted actions send a dangerous message to the international community and represent a major setback in the global effort to secure nuclear materials.

Given the standoff over Ukraine, it is inevitable that many elements of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship will come under severe strain. However, the United States and Russia share a fundamental interest in nuclear security and, with it, a special responsibility to cooperate in this realm. Both countries have been victimized by terrorism, and both continue to be targets of terrorist organizations. A terrorist attack involving a nuclear weapon in any country would deal a devastating blow to global security, the global economy and our way of life. That is why American and Russian leaders cannot allow contention on other fronts to prevent them from pursuing mutually beneficial steps on nuclear security to avoid a disaster.

We have a strong history upon which to build. Cooperation between Washington and Moscow to secure or eliminate weapons of mass destruction dates to 1991, when the Soviet Union was collapsing and the security of its vast nuclear arsenal was in serious doubt. To prevent a nuclear catastrophe, the two of us worked with a bipartisan group of senators to pass legislation that formed the basis of what became known as the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. Under this program, the United States provided assistance to Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet Union to deactivate more than 7,600 nuclear warheads, eliminate more than 4,100

metric tons of chemical weapons, destroy more than 2,600 nuclear delivery vehicles and secure dozens of Soviet-era weapons facilities.

While these efforts dramatically reduced the dangers posed by the legacy of the Cold War, the work to secure Russia's nuclear complex and to secure dangerous materials globally is far from over. Just last August, a high-level Energy Department advisory panel concluded, "Russia continues to have the world's largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons, separated plutonium, and highly enriched uranium (HEU), in the world's largest number of buildings and bunkers - and a variety of vulnerabilities remain that a sophisticated conspiracy could exploit."

Unfortunately, the United States is no stranger to nuclear security vulnerabilities. We have experienced a number of security breaches at our nuclear sites, including an incident two years ago, when an 82-year-old nun and two others staging a protest managed to break into one of the world's most secure nuclear facilities in Oak Ridge, Tenn. If an unarmed nun is capable of breaking into America's nuclear Fort Knox, we must entertain the possibility that terrorists could do the same, with much more serious consequences. Indeed, incidents like these underscore the need for global cooperation to enhance the security of nuclear material, much of which is housed in far less secure locations than Oak Ridge.

This effort must be global because the threat is global. In 1992, 50 countries possessed weapons-usable nuclear materials. Today, that number has been halved, thanks in no small part to bilateral cooperation between the United States and Russia.

Cooperation, however, need not be dominated by unilateral U.S. assistance. We need a new approach - a real nuclear security partnership guided by the principles of reciprocity and mutual interest, to which both countries contribute their own funding and technical resources.

Such a partnership should include: accelerating efforts to repatriate and eliminate U.S. and Russian-origin highly enriched uranium from other countries; collaborating on research and development of innovative nuclear security technologies; expanding nuclear security best-practice exchanges; and utilizing the extensive U.S. and Russian technical expertise to help support nuclear security improvements in other countries with nuclear materials.

These steps and others could be achieved on the basis of mutual interest without major concessions from either side. This will be impossible, however, if cooperation to prevent catastrophic terrorism is regarded as a geopolitical bargaining chip. Failing to cooperate in this area is a "lose-lose" proposition that would damage the vital interests of both nations and vastly increase the risk of nuclear terrorism. The United States and Russia must recognize the imperative to provide global leadership. The consequences of inaction are simply too great.

--Sam Nunn, a former senator from Georgia, co-chairs the Nuclear Threat Initiative. Richard Lugar, a former senator from Indiana, is president of the Lugar Center

RETURN TO TOP

30. We'd be better off without West Point
Abolish all the military academies, Army veteran Scott Beauchamp says
Washington Post, Jan. 25, Pg. B1 | Scott Beauchamp

Most Americans are familiar with the prestige that surrounds the United States military service academies. Various names and phrases, spoken like solemn incantations, attest to their sacrosanct status: the Point, the Long Gray Line,

Annapolis, cadets. Their graduates constitute a who's who of American greatness, including Ulysses Grant; Jimmy Carter, novelist James Salter and sci-fi writer Robert Heinlein, to name a few. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, in a 1962 address at West Point, typified the veneration when he told the cadets that they were "the leaven which binds together the entire fabric of our national system of defense."

The service academies - the U.S. Military Academy for the Army (West Point), the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy - promise to educate and mold future officers charged with leading the enlisted members of the military.

But they are not the hallowed arbiters of quality promised by their myths. Their traditions mask bloated government money-sucks that consistently underperform. They are centers of nepotism that turn below-average students into average officers. They are indulgences that taxpayers, who fund them, can no longer afford. They've outlived their use, and it's time to shut them down.

The most compelling and obvious argument is the financial one. It officially costs about $205,000 to produce a West Point graduate, although a 2003 Government Accountability Office study put the price tag at more than $300,000; officers at the Air Force and Naval academies are minted for $322,000 and $275,000, respectively. According to at least one measurement, that's about four times as much as it costs to produce an officer through the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, which trains officers-to-be while they attend civilian colleges.

One reason for the expense is that attendance at the academies is free for cadets. In fact, since they're technically members of the armed forces, the students get paid for going to school. As Bruce Fleming, a heretical professor at the Naval Academy, wrote for Salon, they receive "a government-sponsored guarantee of a golden ticket to life: college at taxpayer expense with no student debts, the highest salary of any set of graduates, and guaranteed employment and . . . health benefits for at least five years, frequently well beyond."

Perhaps risking your life in patriotic service merits lavish treatment. During my own Army service, not having to worry about housing or medical care surely allowed me to concentrate on my duties as a soldier. But graduates of the academies, which cover every possible expense for four years, make up only 20 percent of officers serving in the military. The rest are from the ROTC and Officer Candidate School, which is for college grads and enlisted personnel who want an officer's commission. Are those other officers less deserving of a "golden ticket"?

No, because they are not merely more numerous - they are also equally (or more) effective as officers. No evidence shows that officers who attended civilian colleges, or any one of the U.S. Senior Military Colleges such as the Citadel, are lesser leaders than their service-academy colleagues. Tom Ricks, a Pulitzer Prize-winning defense journalist, put it succinctly: "After covering the U.S. military for nearly two decades, I've concluded that graduates of the service academies don't stand out compared to other officers." After all, perhaps the most preeminent Army leader in recent times, Colin Powell, is a product of the ROTC, not West Point.

This parity in skill has been slowly expressing itself in a rising number of promotions for ROTC officers over the past few decades. Thirty years ago, most Army three-star generals had graduated from West Point. As of 1997 (the last year for which data is available), only a third had. A study of naval officer ascension using data from 2003 concluded that, on average, there were no real differences in promotion rates between Naval Academy officers and ROTC officers. Of course, these arguments from statistics can't be definitive, but they do indicate that ROTC officers are able to compete with their peers. Nearly half of the Joint Chiefs of Staff serving over the past decade bypassed the service academies.

These days, too, a little thrift wouldn't hurt. The F-35 fighter jet, the most expensive boondoggle in weapons history, is six years late, has already cost taxpayers nearly $400 billion and still doesn't work; in the latest budget, Congress allocated $120 million for M1 Abrams tanks the Army says it doesn't want or need; the Daily Beast recently called the 2016 budget a Christmas present for military contractors. According to the Project on Government Oversight, it includes billions of dollars in spending that the Pentagon didn't request.

Former defense secretary Robert Gates, who embodies bipartisan consensus, said at the Federal Innovation Summit last summer that "what is needed most of all are leaders who are prepared to challenge conventional thinking, break crockery, stop doing what doesn't work well or at all, and set a new course." Well, here's our chance.

Some arguments in favor of the service academies cite the rigorous selection process. But we really have no idea how elite their students are. Admittance requires a nomination from a member of Congress, the vice president, a secretary of the respective military branch or other high-level officials. These nominations are doled out in a process with vague guidelines and nonspecific criteria, making political patronage inevitable. The academies admit recruits according to Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 6954 - which, for guidance, merely says how many cadets can be admitted, who can nominate them and where they can come from. According to an investigation by USA Today, nepotism often governs the nominations, with many going to well-connected families or big-name donors.

Fleming has complained in numerous media outlets about the low quality of the students he teaches at the Naval Academy, and he says three Freedom of Information Act requests about the admissions process haven't gotten him any closer to understanding why some students are admitted over others.

Gore Vidal (born at West Point and connected to the institution by heritage) depicted the service academies as loathsome breeding grounds for a permanent military-elite class of "ring knockers," as he wrote in the New York Review of Books in 1973. That's exactly why people have been trying to shut the academies down since at least 1830, when folk hero and Tennessee congressman Davy Crockett tried to pass a bill abolishing West Point. Another attempt was made in 1863, when Sen. B.F. Wade (R-Ohio) said in the bill's defense, "I do not believe that there can be found, on the whole face of the Earth . . . any institution that has turned out so many false, ungrateful men as have emanated from this institution."

As an enlisted Army infantryman, I served under platoon leaders who attended both West Point and ROTC. All were competent and professional. But the best graduated from the University of California at Santa Barbara. What made him singular was his bravery and his resourcefulness. He was willing, in small ways, to deviate from standard operating procedure when the situation called for it. He also connected to the enlisted guys in an extraordinary way.

The service academies are institutions with deep roots, but bravery and resourcefulness are eminently more American than any particular school. Our country deserves more officers like my platoon leader, and we can have them without the financial and social burden of the service academies.

--Scott Beauchamp is a veteran and a writer who lives in Portland, Maine. He contributes to the Baffler, the Atlantic and Al Jazeera, among other publications

RETURN TO TOP