



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

AS OF 0530 HOURS, JANUARY 26

OVERVIEW

Visiting Nigeria, Secretary John Kerry told the country's top two presidential candidates that future U.S. military assistance in the fight against Boko Haram would depend on February's election being peaceful and transparent. On Yemen, President Obama reiterated the U.S. stance that counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula would not be affected by the political vacuum there, and defended the strategy of using airstrikes instead of American ground troops as "the best option we have." Also of note, the United States and India announced new agreements on defense cooperation, opening what Secretary Chuck Hagel called "a new chapter" in bilateral military ties.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0500

- 'Potentially historic' snowstorm headed for Northeast
- New Jersey's Christie joins crowded GOP fight for donors, forms PAC
- Obama proposes new protections for Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
- Wyoming weighs firing squad as death row backup
- White House gaffe outs American held by Islamic State
- Russian ruble tumbles after violent weekend in east Ukraine

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Al Bawaba*: Libya's deputy foreign minister kidnapped by gunmen
- *Arutz Sheva*: Assad threatens to fight America's anti-ISIS rebels
- *Gulf Times*: Israeli strike in Syria 'bid to set new rules' – Hezbollah

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1945 – Soviet troops enter Auschwitz, Poland, freeing the survivors of the network of concentration camps and finally revealing to the world the depth of the horrors perpetrated there

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1. In Bold Push Forward, Islamist Militants Attack a Major Nigerian City

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A6 | Adam Nossiter and Michael R. Gordon

Amid mounting friction between the two countries over how best to fight Boko Haram -- the relationship is so strained that the Nigerians canceled an American military training program in December -- Secretary of State John Kerry said the United States was prepared to do more to help the faltering Nigerian military. But he warned that the level of American support would be influenced by the determination of Nigeria's politicians to carry out a fair and peaceful election on Feb. 14.

2. Obama: Counterterrorism operations in Yemen not affected

Associated Press, Jan. 25 | Julie Pace and Anne Flaherty

President Barack Obama defended his counterterrorism strategy in tumultuous Yemen Sunday, saying efforts to root out a dangerous al-Qaida affiliate there would not be affected by the political vacuum in the country.

3. Obama reveals nuclear breakthrough on landmark India trip

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Roberta Rampton and Sanjeev Miglani

In a glow of bonhomie, U.S. President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday unveiled plans to unlock billions of dollars in nuclear trade and to deepen defense ties, steps they hope will establish an enduring strategic partnership.

4. A new chapter in India-US defence ties – Hagel

Press Trust of India, Jan. 25 | Not Attributed

The new Indo-US agreements on defence cooperation announced by the two countries on Sunday "promise to open a new chapter" in bilateral military ties and marks an "important milestone" in their strategic partnership, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel said.

MIDEAST

5. White House: 'We cannot be an occupying force in a place like Yemen'

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A2 | Jose A. DelReal

White House chief of staff Denis McDonough on Sunday sought to shore up the Obama administration's message on recent events in the Middle East, stressing that the collapse of Yemen's central government will not derail strategic counterterrorism operations in the region.

6. Shifting Alliances Play Out Behind Closed Doors in Yemen

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A4 | Mona El-Naggar

A number of lawmakers trickled into Parliament on Sunday morning, just in time for an emergency meeting to address the resignation of Yemen's president last week. Minutes later, they walked back out, after hearing that the session had been called off.

7. Saudis fortify their borders as regional chaos grows

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | Kevin Sullivan

Except for Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State controls territory, no country is more directly threatened by Islamist militants than Saudi Arabia, which the extremists regard as a traitor to Islam for Riyadh's close associations with the United States and the West. No king of Saudi Arabia has ascended to the throne amid more regional turmoil than King Salman, who was crowned Friday upon the death of his brother King Abdullah.

8. Saudis Expand Sway in Region as Others Falter

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | David D. Kirkpatrick

The rulers of Saudi Arabia trembled when the Arab Spring revolts broke out four years ago. But far from undermining the Saudi dynasty, the ensuing chaos across the region appears instead to have lifted the monarchy to unrivaled power and influence.

9. Two Deaths Stand Out in Violence in Egypt

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A8 | David D. Kirkpatrick

At least 18 people were killed in political violence in Egypt on Sunday, the fourth anniversary of the Arab Spring uprising, a reminder of the ruthless crackdown the military-backed government has used to silence any echoes of that revolt.

10. Disillusioned by War, Israeli Soldiers Muted in 1967 Are Given Fuller Voice

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A4 | Jodi Rudoren

A young Israeli soldier, fresh from the front, bluntly recounts the orders from above. "They never said, 'Leave no one alive,' but they said, 'Show no mercy,' " he explains. "The brigade commander said to kill as many as possible." The wrenching, taped testimony is not from last summer's bloody battle in the Gaza Strip but from the 1967 war, when Israel started out fighting Egypt, Jordan and Syria for its very survival and ended up seizing the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula and parts of the Golan Heights. As the International Criminal Court considers a war crimes investigation in the recent conflict, a new documentary film is showcasing previously unaired admissions of brutal behavior by an earlier generation.

IRAQ/SYRIA

11. Syria's President Speaks

Foreign Affairs Online, Jan. 26 | Jonathan Tepperman

The civil war in Syria will soon enter its fifth year, with no end in sight. On January 20, Foreign Affairs managing editor Jonathan Tepperman met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to discuss the conflict in an exclusive interview.

12. Syria rebels overtake strategic base in south

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Suleiman Al-Khalidi

Syrian insurgents, including fighters from al Qaeda's Nusra Front, seized an important government army base in the southwestern Deraa province on Sunday, fighters who took part in the battle said.

13. Harsh rule of Islamic State

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Nabih Bulos

Seven months into the takeover of Iraq's second-largest city by Islamist extremists, electricity, rice, flour and medical supplies are dwindling. The water is mucky. Religious minorities are confined to prison camps, and the overwhelmingly Muslim population of Mosul is subject to strict and increasingly arbitrary religious rules.

14. Iraq 'sleeper cells' fight Islamic State group

Associated Press, Jan. 26 | Sameer N. Yacoub

"Sleeper cells" made up of former Iraqi police officers and soldiers are tipping off authorities to Islamic State group positions in the northern city of Mosul, a prominent lawmaker has told The Associated Press. The comments by Hakim al-Zamili, the head of parliament's security and defense committee, are the first high-level confirmation of the groups' existence after weeks of rumors.

ASIA/PACIFIC

15. Forty-nine Philippine police killed after clash with rebels

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 26 | Joel Guinto

Forty-nine Philippine police commandos were killed when they clashed with Muslim rebels in the south, police said Monday, a bloodbath which tested a peace accord signed last March.

16. Two Japanese Hostages, as Different as Can Be, Linked by Fate in Syria

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A9 | Martin Fackler

In the public's mind, the two Japanese hostages held by Islamic State militants have become inextricably linked: a pair of grim-faced figures who appeared last week in a video kneeling in orange jumpsuits next to a masked militant demanding a ransom for their lives. Yet the paths that led the two men to their joint captivity in Syria could not have been more different.

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

17. Afghan air force ascent slow, imperiling battle with Taliban

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Kay Johnson

Afghanistan's armed forces are so short of combat-ready aircraft that, late last year, they began fitting machine guns and rockets to Russian-made Mi-17 transport helicopters, dubbed "flying tractors", to bolster their air power. With new planes capable of engaging Taliban insurgents delayed by over two years, and NATO air missions backing up troops on the ground now at a minimum, the fledgling Afghan Air Force is scrambling to provide even basic support.

UKRAINE/RUSSIA

18. West looks for ways to pressure Moscow

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A8 | Karoun Demirjian

Western leaders are weighing what new pressure they can put on Moscow to rein in pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, after a rocket attack on the port city of Mariupol left dozens of civilians dead. President Obama said Sunday that he was "deeply concerned" about the latest round of hostilities, during which Grad rockets that international monitors claimed were fired from rebel-held territory hit homes, stores and a school in Mariupol, killing 30 and wounding more than 100 Saturday. Obama promised the United States would "continue to ratchet up the pressure" on Russia in response, considering every option short of military engagement.

19. Will Russia's Sub-Building Boom Matter?

Defense News, Jan. 26, Pg. 1 | Christopher P. Cavas

The Russian Navy's submarine force is on a roll. Four different kinds of submarines are under construction and more are coming. The country expects to lay down five new nuclear submarines in 2015. Combine the revived Russian submarine construction rate with President Vladimir Putin's aggressive stances of the past year, along with the steady drumbeat of Chinese naval expansion, and the question might be asked — is a submarine race going on?

EUROPE

20. Germany stops arms exports to Saudi Arabia – media report

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Michelle Martin and Thomas Seythal

Germany has decided to stop exporting arms to Saudi Arabia, the German newspaper Bild am Sonntag said on Sunday, citing government sources as saying the kingdom was "too unstable" for it to be receiving deliveries of weapons.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

21. Chuck Hagel exiting on his own terms

Politico.com, Jan. 25 | Philip Ewing

Chuck Hagel is going out like he came in: on his own. When the White House invited him to the ceremony in which President Barack Obama nominated his successor, he didn't go. As members of Congress schedule their hearings about the Pentagon's new budget, they're getting his successor, not him. And even though the military plans a big, formal farewell for Hagel on Wednesday, he expects to stay on the job for several more weeks — with an even lower profile.

22. DoD Business Panel Proposes \$125 Billion in Savings

Defense News, Jan. 26, Pg. 7 | Paul McLeary

The Pentagon's Defense Business Board (DBB) issued a series of recommendations on Jan. 22 calling on the Defense Department to slash \$125 billion in spending over the next five years by reducing services from contractors, implementing early retirements, reworking contracts and reducing administrative costs. The report comes at the direction of Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work, whose October 2014 memo to the civilian panel instructed it to form a Task Group "to review and recommend changes to the Department's current plans for enterprise modernization."

23. Bottomless Pit at the Pentagon

CQ Weekly, Jan. 26, Pg. 18 | Shawn Zeller

The war on terrorism that began in full after the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 has been phenomenally expensive, but not many people know just how costly. The Congressional Research Service put a number on it last month, tallying up appropriations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus the costs of military base security, and found that America's longest war has cost the American people \$1.6 trillion through fiscal 2014. Add about \$73.5 billion for fiscal 2015, the appropriations for which were settled after the report came out. That overall cost is equal to nearly half of the total federal budget for fiscal 2014, which was about \$3.5 trillion.

24. Few Weapons Left for Defense Firms

Wall Street Journal, Jan. 26, Pg. B2 | Doug Cameron

U.S. defense companies became a safe haven for investors over the past two years, but new leadership in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill could reduce some of the advantages that helped the sector outperform the broader market over the past two years, even as industry sales declined.

ARMY

25. Couple referred 2,070 soldiers

USA Today, Jan. 26, Pg. A5 | Tom Vanden Brook

The Texas couple who reaped nearly \$4 million in recruiting bonuses from the Army referred nearly 50 times as many recruits as the next highest recipient in the Army's defunct bounty program for new soldiers, records show.

NAVY

26. Navy wants to increase use of sonar-emitting buoys

Associated Press, Jan. 25 | Phuong Le

The U.S. Navy is seeking permits to expand sonar and other training exercises off the Pacific Coast, a proposal raising concerns from animal advocates who say that more sonar-emitting buoys would harm whales and other creatures that live in the water.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

27. Our Man in Damascus

Wall Street Journal, Jan. 26, Pg. A14 | Editorial

President Obama is cutting short his visit to India to stop in Saudi Arabia to pay his respects on the death of King Abdullah and no doubt try to repair what has been a fraying relationship. It's a good move, but he'll need an explanation for the latest stories that the U.S. is suddenly prepared to live with Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

28. Cozying up to the dictators

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A17 | Fred Hiatt

As President Obama stumbles in implementing his own strategy for combating terrorism, the United States is reverting, almost by default, to an earlier, failed approach: a reliance on dictators to do our dirty work.

29. The U.S. Needs a New Yardstick for a New Kind of War

Time.com, Jan. 25 | Mark Thompson

Body counts are never a good a yardstick for measuring progress in a war of ideas. That's why the Pentagon freaked out Thursday when Stuart Jones, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, told the Al Arabiya News Channel that America and its allies "have now killed more than 6,000 ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq."

30. How to halt next terror generation

USA Today, Jan. 26, Pg. A7 | Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton

Ideas are not easily destroyed. Bullets could not extinguish the irreverence of Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical newspaper recently targeted by terrorists. Nor can increased counterterrorism efforts alone eradicate the radical Islamist incitement to violence that inspired recent atrocities in Ottawa, Sydney, Paris and Peshawar. Such policies help prevent the next terrorist attack but cannot stop the cultivation of the next generation of terrorists. For that, we must defeat and discredit this extremist ideology.

TOP STORIES

1. In Bold Push Forward, Islamist Militants Attack a Major Nigerian City

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria -- Maiduguri, the major city in Nigeria's northeast, came under sustained attack from Boko Haram terrorists on Sunday, and officials here called it the group's most audacious assault on the city to date.

By early afternoon, the attackers had been beaten back, but not before dozens of soldiers had been killed, officials said. They said the insurgents had taken a major military base to the north of the city, sending about 1,400 soldiers fleeing into the bush.

The attack on this city of more than two million people, a commercial and administrative hub, began late Saturday when the militants from the Islamist insurgency rushed in from at least two directions. Loud explosions could be heard in the center of the city, as well as small-arms fire and artillery in its suburbs. The attack was a significant thrust forward in a creeping campaign that began last summer to encircle Maiduguri, officials said.

"Certainly this is the most serious attack yet," said Kashim Shettima, the governor of Borno State, of which Maiduguri is the capital. "We faced a really existential threat."

A military curfew pushed all civilian vehicles off the streets, and by early evening the only sound in Maiduguri, a normally bustling metropolis of open-air markets and street-side stalls, was the call to prayer from the numerous mosques.

Before being repulsed, the insurgents again demonstrated the tactical mettle that has allowed them to gain control of territory for hundreds of miles around Maiduguri. They overwhelmed soldiers at one of the principal military checkpoints outside the city, arriving in buses as if they were ordinary travelers, Mr. Shettima said. "The soldiers were completely caught off guard," he said.

Before the soldiers realized who they were, the Boko Haram insurgents opened fire. "I believe they must have killed hundreds," Mr. Shettima said as he tried to give an estimate of the military casualties. At the same time, the Islamists were attacking another position close to the city, straining the military's resources in the area.

"They are becoming more and more sophisticated by the day," added Mr. Shettima, who said he feared another attack on the city. "They have essentially put the town under siege. They have cut the town off from all routes. They are continuously squeezing us into a very tight corner."

After the insurgents overwhelmed the soldiers, they moved to a checkpoint closer to the city. The military then called in warplanes, and officials said bombs dropped on insurgent positions turned the tide of the battle here, even as a town to the north, Monguno, was falling.

A top federal police official, who was in Maiduguri after a presidential visit and asked not to be identified so that he could speak freely, said: "In the early hours of the day, the Boko Haram wanted to come into town. But by the grace of God, we have repelled them."

The top military official here declined to discuss the day's events.

The attack on Maiduguri coincided with a visit by Secretary of State John Kerry to Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos, for meetings with President Goodluck Jonathan and his challenger in the coming presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari, a retired general.

Amid mounting friction between the two countries over how best to fight Boko Haram -- the relationship is so strained that the Nigerians canceled an American military training program in December -- Mr. Kerry said the United States was prepared to do more to help the faltering Nigerian military.

But he warned that the level of American support would be influenced by the determination of Nigeria's politicians to carry out a fair and peaceful election on Feb. 14. American officials also fear that the Nigerian military has been infiltrated by Boko Haram, a claim angrily denied by the Nigerians.

"Bottom line, we want to do more," Mr. Kerry said Sunday. "But our ability to do more will depend to some degree on the full measure of credibility, accountability, transparency and peacefulness of this election." His pointed warning came against a backdrop of campaign violence by supporters of the candidates and a history of electoral fraud and postelection killing.

In Maiduguri, as the attack progressed on Sunday, witnesses reported seeing hundreds of residents fleeing the suburbs and rushing toward the city's center. The witnesses also reported seeing some Nigerian troops moving away from the fighting, a response that is not uncommon when they clash with insurgents.

Sabo Fari, a bicycle repairman who fled during the fighting in Maiduguri's suburbs, said he had nearly been killed. "Bullets flew over my head," Mr. Fari said. "My house shook severely. I took the risk. I directed the whole of my family to vacate the house."

The violence shook Maiduguri's suburbs. "There's a lot of gunshots and explosions," said a top official at the city's leading hospital who lives at the city's edge. He asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to reporters. "These boys are trying to come into town."

Officials with the humanitarian agency Unicef in Borno State said aid workers, including from the Red Cross, reported that six civilians and 40 insurgents had been killed and that 40 people had been wounded in the area near the Maiduguri airport. The death toll was likely to rise, and casualties in Monguno were expected to be higher, they said.

Soldiers here were able to retake some of the military equipment that the insurgents had captured after a bloody assault on a military base and village this month in Baga. The soldiers seized an armored personnel carrier and a heavy artillery gun, said Mr. Shettima, the governor of Borno State.

The insurgents attacked Maiduguri hours after Mr. Jonathan left the city after a campaign speech. Just before the president arrived, the militants attacked Kambari, a village barely three miles from Maiduguri, burning it and killing 15 people.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven from their homes and at least 10,000 have been killed over the course of the Islamists' insurgency, now stretching into its sixth year.

Mr. Shettima, who is also a leading member of the opposition party, All Progressives Congress, expressed exasperation over the attack by Boko Haram on Sunday. "It's so sad," he said. "If a genuine effort had been made, this thing could have been stopped a long time ago. It's a ragtag army."

How the United States plans to help Nigeria regain the initiative against the insurgents remained unclear. Boko Haram's abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls last spring provoked outrage in the United States and Europe. But a breakdown in trust between the United States' and Nigeria's militaries has hampered cooperation against Boko Haram, as have fears that giving heavy weapons to Nigerian forces could lead to human rights abuses.

After a meeting with his British counterpart this month, Mr. Kerry said the attacks by Boko Haram constituted war crimes, and he asserted that the United States was planning a "special initiative" to counter the group.

But Mr. Kerry has not provided details about what that initiative is, when it might be undertaken or how the cooperation between the two militaries might be improved.

He said there was evidence that the militants from the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, which has declared a caliphate in eastern Syria and northern and western Iraq, were trying to forge alliances with terrorist groups in Africa.

"It is obviously a concern that they may try more aggressively to try to spread to countries in center and southern and other parts of Africa," Mr. Kerry said. He added that there was no indication as yet that Boko Haram had formally affiliated itself with the Islamic State.

--Adam Nossiter reported from Maiduguri, and Michael R. Gordon from Lagos, Nigeria

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2. Obama: Counterterrorism operations in Yemen not affected

Associated Press, Jan. 25 | Julie Pace and Anne Flaherty

NEW DELHI — President Barack Obama defended his counterterrorism strategy in tumultuous Yemen Sunday, saying efforts to root out a dangerous al-Qaida affiliate there would not be affected by the political vacuum in the country.

The U.S. campaign against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula is heavily dependent on using drone strikes to take out terror targets. Obama has held up that approach as a model for the military mission against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, which relies on airstrikes instead of U.S. ground troops.

Obama, who is traveling in India, said that approach "is not neat and it is not simple, but it is the best option we have."

"The alternative would be massive U.S. deployments in perpetuity, which would create its own blowback and cause probably more problems than it would potentially solve," Obama said during a joint media appearance with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The president said that while he was concerned about the fragility of Yemen's central government following the resignation last week of the U.S.-backed president and Cabinet, the country "has never been a perfect democracy or an island of stability."

The instability in Yemen has raised concerns among some lawmakers about Obama's broader anti-terror strategy. Republican Sen. John McCain and Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein told CBS' "Face the Nation" that more special operations forces may be needed in countries battling extremists.

McCain, the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, accused the administration of being "delusional" in thinking that its strategy in the Middle East was working and said Iran was "on the march." The Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, who now control Yemen's capital of Sanaa are widely believed to be backed by Iran, though they deny having any support from the Islamic republic.

"We need more boots on the ground," said McCain, R-Ariz. "I know that's a tough thing to say, and a tough thing for Americans to swallow. But it doesn't mean the 82nd Airborne. It means forward air controllers. It means special forces, it means intelligence, and it means other capabilities."

Feinstein, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said she agreed that more special operations forces are necessary. She also said the U.S. needs more human intelligence in the region instead of relying so heavily on intelligence gathered by technical means.

The California Democrat said that while Americans "don't want another war," she believes it is time "to look more deeply and broadly into what we're doing and how we're doing it." She said the U.S. must also do more to protect U.S. partners in the region, including Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Sunday they expect that Congress won't try to prohibit ground troops in upcoming legislation authorizing U.S. military force against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria. Obama has called on Congress to pass such a measure, and GOP leaders have agreed. But administration officials also have said Obama won't send combat troops to Iraq or Syria, while Gen. Martin Dempsey, the top uniformed military officer, said at some point he could recommend that.

"I don't want to limit the president's ability to take on the terrorist threat directly," Boehner told CBS' "60 Minutes."

Yemen is home to al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, which the U.S. views as the global terrorist network's most dangerous branch. The group has been linked to numerous failed attacks on the U.S. and claimed responsibility for the attack on a Paris satirical magazine this month.

Obama has relied heavily on drone strikes to take out terror targets in Yemen. There were 23 U.S. drone strikes last year and 23 the year before, according to Long War Journal, which tracks the strikes based on local media reports.

The U.S. military also has trained elite counterterrorism units of Yemen's military that have battled al-Qaida.

--Flaherty reported from Washington

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3. Obama reveals nuclear breakthrough on landmark India trip

NEW DELHI -- In a glow of bonhomie, U.S. President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday unveiled plans to unlock billions of dollars in nuclear trade and to deepen defense ties, steps they hope will establish an enduring strategic partnership.

The two countries reached an understanding on two issues that, despite a groundbreaking 2006 agreement, had stopped U.S. companies from setting up reactors in India and had become one of the major irritants in bilateral relations.

"We are committed to moving towards full implementation," Obama told a joint news conference with Modi. "This is an important step that shows how we can work together to elevate our relationship."

The new deal resolved differences over the liability of suppliers to India in the event of a nuclear accident and U.S. demands on tracking the whereabouts of material supplied to the country, U.S. ambassador to India Richard Verma told reporters.

"Ultimately it's up to the companies to go forward, but the two governments came to an understanding," he added.

Signaling warmth and determination to take ties to a higher level, Modi broke with protocol to meet and bear-hug Obama as he landed in New Delhi, then referred to him as Barack. It was a remarkable spectacle, given that a year ago Modi was persona non grata in Washington and was denied a visa to the United States.

Between a working lunch that included kebabs made with lotus stem, figs and spices and an evening banquet where Obama spoke a smattering of Hindi, the two leaders got down to talks.

They emerged with a 10-year framework for defense ties and deals on cooperation that included the joint production of drone aircraft and equipment for Lockheed Martin Corp's C-130 military transport plane.

Other deals ranged from an Obama-Modi hotline -- India's first at a leadership level -- to financing initiatives aimed at helping India use renewable energy to lower carbon intensity.

But Modi cautioned that work was still needed to create a solid partnership between the world's two largest democracies.

"We have to convert a good start into lasting progress. This requires translating our vision into sustained action and concrete achievements," he said, standing next to Obama.

On Monday, Obama will be the first U.S. president to attend India's Republic Day parade, an annual show of military might long associated with the anti-Americanism of the Cold War. He will also host a radio show with Modi.

His presence at the parade at Modi's personal invitation marks the latest upturn in a roller-coaster bilateral relationship that just a year ago was in tatters.

Up to 40,000 security personnel have been deployed for the visit and 15,000 new closed-circuit surveillance cameras have been installed in the capital, according to media reports.

NEW VITALITY

The United States views India as a vast market and potential counterweight in Asia to a more assertive China, but has frequently been frustrated with the slow pace of New Delhi's economic reforms and unwillingness to side with Washington in international affairs.

Elected last May, Modi has injected a new vitality into the economy and foreign relations and, to Washington's delight, has begun pushing back against China across Asia.

In a veiled reference to China, the leaders reiterated the "importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea". They also called for the peaceful resolution of territorial conflicts.

Obama will depart slightly early from India to travel to Saudi Arabia following the death of King Abdullah, skipping a planned visit to the Taj Mahal.

Like Obama, Modi rose from modest origins to break into a political elite dominated by powerful families. Aides say the two men bonded in Washington in September when Obama took Modi to the memorial of Martin Luther King, whose rights struggle was inspired by India's Mahatma Gandhi.

On Sunday, the two leaders talked outside over tea in an elegant garden. Modi, who sold tea on a railway platform as a child, poured a cup for Obama.

The "chemistry" they describe is striking because Modi's politics is considerably to the right of Obama's and because he was banned from visiting the United States for nearly a decade after deadly Hindu-Muslim riots in a state he governed.

Obama, the first sitting U.S. president to visit India twice, also enjoyed a close friendship with Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh, who staked his premiership on the controversial nuclear deal that made India the sixth "legitimate" atomic power and marked a high point in Indo-U.S. relations.

The deal failed to deliver on a promise of business for U.S. companies because of India's reluctance to shield suppliers from liability, a deviation from international norms that reflects the memory of the Bhopal industrial disaster.

--Additional reporting by Douglas Busvine and Frank Jack Daniel in New Delhi

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4. A new chapter in India-US defence ties – Hagel

Press Trust of India, Jan. 25 | Not Attributed

WASHINGTON -- The new Indo-US agreements on defence cooperation announced by the two countries on Sunday "promise to open a new chapter" in bilateral military ties and marks an "important milestone" in their strategic partnership, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel said.

President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday broke a seven-year-old logjam in operationalising their landmark civil nuclear deal in addition to deciding to jointly produce military hardware, including advanced unmanned aerial vehicles, during their talks in New Delhi.

"By finalising the renewal of our 10-year framework for the US-India defence relationship, we will continue to build on the growing momentum in our defence cooperation over the last decade," Hagel said in a statement.

"This renewed framework will support stronger military-to-military engagement, including deeper maritime cooperation and increased opportunities in technology and trade.

"By establishing a new military education partnership, we will help shape the next generation of military leaders in both our nations, fostering relationships that will draw our defence establishments closer together for years to come."

Hagel said by agreeing under the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative to focus on four "pathfinder" projects, form a working group to explore aircraft carrier technology sharing and design, and explore possible cooperation on development of jet engine technology, the two countries will begin to realise the enormous potential of the US-India defence industrial partnership.

"We have further strengthened this partnership with an agreement that will allow us to continue science and technology collaboration for the next 15 years," said the outgoing defence secretary, who visited India within the first 100 days of the Modi government.

"Taken together, the President's announcements signal a new depth and sophistication in our defence and security cooperation, ensuring that it continues to be one of the strongest pillars of our nations' broad strategic partnership - a partnership that will help forge security and stability in Asia and across the globe," Hagel said.

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MIDEAST

5. White House: 'We cannot be an occupying force in a place like Yemen'

Chief of staff says U.S. counterterrorism effort is undeterred

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A2 | Jose A. DelReal

White House chief of staff Denis McDonough on Sunday sought to shore up the Obama administration's message on recent events in the Middle East, stressing that the collapse of Yemen's central government will not derail strategic counterterrorism operations in the region.

"I think it's very important to recognize that governance in Yemen has always been difficult," McDonough said on CBS's "Face the Nation." "We will continue to press on the ground, including today, to make decisions transparently, pursuant to a political agreement, so that we can work with them to keep on the offensive against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula."

McDonough's comments came during a post-State of the Union blitz that included appearances on all five major Sunday talk shows - a morning swing known as "a full Ginsburg." Predictably, given recent events - although nonetheless striking - the domestic policy agenda outlined by the president in last week's annual address took a back seat to questions about the administration's foreign policy.

News that Yemen's government had been toppled by Shiite rebels known as Houthis - who oppose American influence in the region - took particular priority.

"We don't have a partner now, do we?" asked ABC "This Week" host George Stephanopoulos before questioning whether the administration will be able to work with Houthis in the fight against al-Qaeda.

"I'm not going to jump to any conclusions," McDonough said. "I am going to say to the parties on the ground that they have to resolve this transparently, peacefully, politically. And we will, while they're doing that, continue to make sure that we're focused on the threat to us and to our people."

McDonough, speaking on behalf of the White House, stressed that the United States would not intervene to stabilize the government in Yemen.

"We cannot be an occupying force in a place like Yemen or in Syria and hope that we will be responsible for bringing this, as you say, 'chaos' to an end. We ought to train them, the security forces. We ought to press their political leaders to come up with political resolutions on the ground," McDonough said on CNN's "State of the Union."

He added: "We will take action to protect the American people. This president has done that. He will continue to do that."

Two senior senators recommended Sunday that Obama send more troops - or at least Special Operations forces and intelligence teams - to combat the rising anti-American forces in Yemen.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee, called the Obama administration's strategy in Yemen "delusional" and said Obama and McDonough "have lost touch with reality" if they reject the need for U.S. forces there. "We need more boots on the grounds," McCain said on "Face the Nation." "I know that's a tough thing to say and a tough thing for Americans to swallow."

He added that the United States does not need to send the 82nd Airborne Division but should install more intelligence operatives and special-forces teams.

McCain said the Houthis who wrested control of the Yemeni government are supported by Iranians. "I did not hear Mr. McDonough articulate a strategy, except that we will fight against these people, which is nice to know," McCain said. "But when you look at the map, that Iranians are on the march. AQAP and ISIS . . . are doing quite well. There is no strategy to defeat them," he said, using the initials for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and an acronym for the Islamic State.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), the former longtime chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and now its top Democrat, said she agreed with McCain that some U.S. presence is needed.

"Where McCain is right is . . . we need some Special Operations on the ground, more than just advisers," she said on "Face the Nation."

She added: "I think our intelligence with respect to what's going to happen in many of these countries is weak. The future is unknown, which really should not be the case."

Feinstein added that the Houthis' slogan is "Death to America, death to Israel."

McDonough also fielded questions on a controversial congressional invitation extended to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which was made without consultation with the White House.

"Is the president, is the White House, are you angry with Speaker [John] Boehner for doing this on his own and for Netanyahu accepting it on his own without any consultation with the White House?" asked Chris Wallace on "Fox News Sunday."

"Look, I don't spend a lot of time on my emotions or getting angry," McDonough said. ". . . And here's the way the president has always seen the U.S.-Israel relationship: as above partisan politics, something that is fundamentally in our interest. And so, that's how we'll continue to treat this, irrespective of how this thing goes back and forth."

--Carol D. Leonnig contributed to this report

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6. Shifting Alliances Play Out Behind Closed Doors in Yemen

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A4 | Mona El-Naggar

SANA, Yemen -- A number of lawmakers trickled into Parliament on Sunday morning, just in time for an emergency meeting to address the resignation of Yemen's president last week. Minutes later, they walked back out, after hearing that the session had been called off.

"Members aren't allowed in, and no one will attend," Yehia al-Matari, a member of Parliament, told another official over the phone. Mr. Matari explained that Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of a Shiite-led rebel group now in control of most security and state institutions, appeared to be calling the shots.

Another lawmaker, Mohamed Saleh Ali, offered a different explanation. According to Mr. Ali, the meeting was canceled partly because the president of Parliament was traveling to Saudi Arabia, which sees the Houthis as an extension of Iranian influence and has cut off nearly all aid to the Yemeni government.

"We're used to this, postponing a day, or two or three," Mr. Ali said, calmly. "It's not a big deal. This is how it is in Yemen."

Power in Yemen is largely centered in the hands of individuals rather than institutions, and national identity often competes with tribal and sectarian allegiances. The Houthi-led takeover, which forced the resignation of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi on Thursday, is part of a broader structure of shifting alliances and warring interests that are now being negotiated behind closed doors, political analysts and officials say.

On Saturday, two Houthi representatives met with Jamal Benomar, the United Nations envoy to Yemen, who had been employing a kind of shuttle diplomacy to chart a way out of the standoff. As soon as the Houthis left, Mr. Benomar moved to a different room for his next appointment. But no one appeared to be inching any closer to a real solution.

"There are many parties here in this equation, and they all have different interests, different incentives," Mr. Benomar said.

The Houthis, who fought to establish themselves as the dominant force on the ground, now want to see their street might translated into political capital and are demanding crucial leadership positions.

But internal disagreements exist. Some Houthis are willing to work with the majority party of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, but other, older members of the group experienced years of persecution and violence under his government and fear that he could make a comeback if his son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, became president.

"It was already very hard to convince people not to go after him for revenge," one member of the Houthi revolutionary committees said, referring to the former President Saleh. He did not want to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to the news media.

Mr. Houthi, he said, "had to talk to some of his supporters, one by one, and beg them to forget the past."

The Houthis stormed Sana, the capital, in September with the help of Mr. Saleh, who still wields power through tribes and army units that have remained loyal to him even after he was forced out of power in 2012.

Muhammed al-Faqih, a member of Mr. Saleh's public relations office, said Mr. Saleh had not facilitated the Houthi takeover. Instead, Mr. Faqih said, Mr. Saleh took an impartial stance. But that effectively gave the Houthis a green light because they knew they would not encounter resistance from Mr. Saleh's forces.

Mr. Saleh and the Houthis also shared a common enemy: Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a top army commander who had led military campaigns against the Houthis in the north for many years under Mr. Saleh but then helped push Mr. Saleh from power.

According to Nabil Abdel Rab, who manages the majority party's website, Mr. Ahmar fled to Saudi Arabia the day the Houthis entered the capital.

"Ali Abdullah Saleh is now the No. 1 force in Yemen," Mr. Abdel Rab contended, explaining that the Houthis had cleared out Mr. Saleh's enemies and undermined Yemen's current leadership. "Now, between the Shiite Houthis and the Sunni opposition, Saleh or his son will look like the only middle-ground solution."

At this stage, the Houthis, powerful but wary, are reassessing their prospects for alliances. But their swift victories have reignited separatist demands in southern Yemen. Alarmed by the Houthis' expansion, the separatist movement in the south has also started to seize territory. It is openly working with Al Qaeda, also present in the south, to assert its independent identity.

"It creates a huge pool for recruitment," Mr. Benomar said. "Al Qaeda is benefiting from this, and that is frightening."

Not far from Parliament, Abdallah Nasser, 21, was selling stickers with portraits of Yemen's leading political figures: Mr. Houthi, the elder Mr. Saleh and his son. The stickers of Mr. Saleh's son had been marked up because they were the most popular, Mr. Nasser said.

But with respect to Mr. Hadi, it appears that Mr. Nasser's customers have just moved on.

"No one ever asks for him," Mr. Nasser said.

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7. Saudis fortify their borders as regional chaos grows

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | Kevin Sullivan

ARAR, Saudi Arabia - At 3 a.m. on a cold desert night earlier this month, four Islamic State militants carrying guns, grenades and cash slipped into Saudi Arabia here through a hole in the new heavy fencing that separates this country from Iraq.

They were immediately spotted by Saudi border guards in a state-of-the-art control room 35 miles away, appearing first as blips on radar, then as ghostly white figures on night-vision cameras scanning the desolate desert landscape.

Heavily armed troops were dispatched to confront them. When the battle ended, the four intruders - all Saudi citizens - and three Saudi soldiers were dead, including the local base commander, who was killed when a militant pretending to surrender detonated a suicide vest.

"Thanks to God and our new systems, we are ready for whatever they try," said the new commander, Ali Mohammed Assiri, whose troops have now been issued orders to shoot on sight anyone breaching the border. "If you are not willing to defend the country, you don't deserve to live in it."

Except for Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State controls territory, no country is more directly threatened by Islamist militants than Saudi Arabia, which the extremists regard as a traitor to Islam for Riyadh's close associations with the United States and the West.

No king of Saudi Arabia has ascended to the throne amid more regional turmoil than King Salman, who was crowned Friday upon the death of his brother King Abdullah.

With war raging in Syria and tensions with Iran increasing, Saudi Arabia is threatened by a disintegration of the national government in Yemen across its southern border and by the Islamic State militants who dominate the Iraqi desert just over its northern border.

Salman indirectly mentioned the threat of rising violence and regional instability on Friday in his first speech to the Saudi people, saying that "the Arab and Islamic nation is in dire need today to be united and maintain solidarity."

Militants have staged four attacks inside the kingdom in the past six months, resulting in the deaths of eight civilians, 11 police or border guards and 13 militants, according to Saudi officials.

As in the recent attacks in Paris on the Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper and a kosher supermarket, most of the Saudi attacks have been carried out by homegrown radicals influenced or trained by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda or other extremist groups. Saudi authorities said that they have arrested 293 people in connection with the incidents and that 260 of them are Saudi nationals.

Saudi officials are anticipating more attacks, either by some of the 2,200 or so Saudi citizens they say have gone to fight with the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq, or by others who infiltrate Saudi Arabia's borders, especially the nearly 600-mile frontier with Iraq, which runs mainly through empty desert.

"They are targeting Saudi Arabia, and they want to have a very big terrorist act in this country," said Gen. Mansour al-Turki, spokesman for the Interior Ministry.

The Saudi government has responded by sharply beefing up border security and by creating new laws that give the government broad power to arrest anyone who joins, or even praises, the radical groups - which has led to complaints from human rights groups that the laws are being unfairly used against activists who merely criticize the government.

Officials have also made it illegal for imams in the country's 85,000 mosques to give sermons sympathizing with religious extremists. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has launched the al-Sakinah Campaign for Dialogue, an anti-radicalization program that includes a Web site offering anonymous counseling.

"We are also educating the imams to tell people that what ISIS is saying is against Islam," said Tawfeeq al-Sediry, Saudi Arabia's deputy minister of Islamic affairs. "They represent violence. We represent the real Islam."

Saudi officials said they have also tightened controls on charities suspected of channeling money to radicals. Wealthy Saudi individuals are widely believed to be a significant source of funding for the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Critics point to that funding as evidence that many Saudis quietly support the Islamic State, seeing it as a Sunni Muslim force fighting to protect other Sunnis, especially in Syria and Iraq, where Shiite Muslims control the government with the support of Saudi Arabia's chief rival, Iran.

"In the Middle East, it's nothing new: You create your own terrorists, then pretend you are fighting them," said Ali al-Ahmed, a Saudi activist who runs the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington. "The Saudis didn't even invent it, but they're good at it."

Ahmed said the Saudi government is "playing both sides" to give "the appearance that they are the good guys."

"They get a lot of political traction out of it," Ahmed said. "To the Americans, they are the guardians of safety, and no matter how horrible they are on human rights, the way they treat women and all that, they are the ones who are keeping things under control. Really, they are very clever."

Awadh al-Badi, a researcher and scholar at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, rejects those assertions. He says the Islamic State is offering arguments that attract some idealistic young Muslims.

Islamic State leaders say they want to establish a vast Islamic caliphate or "khalifa," including taking control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are in Saudi Arabia.

"For many young people, the idea of khalifa is the idea of the great Islam," Badi said. "The idea itself is attractive to many people who aspire to see a return of Islamic dignity and influence."

One Western diplomat based in Riyadh said Saudi cooperation in the fight against Islamist militants has been unwavering. He noted that Saudi Arabia has joined the U.S.-led military coalition against the Islamic State and sent jets to bomb militant targets - including one F-16 piloted by King Salman's son Prince Khaled.

"We have had to fight the perception that the Saudis are not doing enough," the diplomat said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "From here, we think they are doing plenty. They tell us, 'We've been fighting these guys and their ilk for 12 years, so don't tell us how to fight these people.'"

The kingdom faced a wave of al-Qaeda attacks in the mid-2000s, but officials were able to stop them with a fierce crackdown that resulted in the jailing of thousands of suspected militants.

The decree issued last spring making it illegal to belong to or publicly support the Islamic State and other radical groups has slowed the flow of Saudis joining the militants, said Turki, the Interior Ministry spokesman, because it allows police to arrest anyone trying to go as well as those returning.

The most visible sign of Saudi Arabia's response to the rising militant threat is the extensive new system of fences, ditches, razor wire and berms along the border with Iraq, which stretches from the border with Kuwait in the east to Jordan in the west.

King Abdullah inaugurated the barrier system in September after six years of construction on the project, which was initially conceived as a defense against the sectarian chaos in Iraq but is now primarily a defense against the Islamic State.

Saudi officials have also embarked on a multiyear project to similarly fortify all the thousands of miles of land borders, with Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and especially Yemen - where the government was recently toppled by rebels aligned with Iran, Saudi Arabia's main rival for power in the region.

Sometimes jokingly referred to as the "Great Wall," the Iraq border defense system involves two high fences topped with concertina wire, backed by deep ditches and tall sand berms designed to make it impossible for any vehicle to cross.

The physical barriers are reinforced by technological ones, with 40 radar towers, each 125 feet high, that constantly sweep a radius of nearly 25 miles looking for any movement. Each tower is fitted with two cameras - one for daytime, one for night - that can zoom in on objects up to 12 miles away.

At the border's main control room, at the border guard base in Arar, a town of about 100,000 people in the empty desert nearly 600 miles northwest of Riyadh, operators sit at computer monitors watching 24 hours a day.

When radar spots something moving in a suspicious place, the operators use a mouse to swivel the camera in its direction. Most of the time it's nothing dangerous - a camel or a shepherd's dog - but in the pre-dawn hours of Jan. 5, it was four heavily armed militants.

Not far from a remote and desolate border crossing, which is open only during the hajj pilgrimage season, the four militants slipped through a hole left by a construction crew working on the fence.

Turki said the men were trying to get to Arar, where police arrested three Saudis and four Syrians suspected of plotting with the infiltrators. The four militants were carrying nearly \$20,000 in cash, four suicide vests, six grenades, five assault rifles and pistols and two silencers.

"Even if they got to Arar, were they waiting for the people to rise with them? I doubt it," said Badi, the King Faisal Center scholar. "They send messages: 'We are capable of coming to you. We will target you. Terrorism will come to you.'

"It's the same idea as the attacks in France," he said. "They are not planning to take over France, but they send a message that they can do this."

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8. Saudis Expand Sway in Region as Others Falter

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | David D. Kirkpatrick

CAIRO -- The rulers of Saudi Arabia trembled when the Arab Spring revolts broke out four years ago.

But far from undermining the Saudi dynasty, the ensuing chaos across the region appears instead to have lifted the monarchy to unrivaled power and influence. As a new king assumes the throne in Riyadh, the stability-first authoritarianism that the Saudis have long favored is resurgent from Tunis to Cairo to Manama. The election-minded Islamists that the Saudis once feared are on the run. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the interior minister who spearheaded the push against them, was rewarded last week with his elevation to deputy crown prince, the first in his generation in the line of succession.

The catch, analysts and diplomats say, is that the ascendance of the Saudis is largely a byproduct of the feebleness or near-collapse of so many of the states around them, including Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Tunisia. And the perseverance of the old order is largely dependent on a steady flow of Saudi resources, so their influence may be costly.

The Saudis are propping up the Kingdom of Bahrain, and are fighting alongside the United States to support the government in Baghdad. Billions of dollars from Saudi coffers are sustaining friendly governments in Egypt and Jordan. Saudi-backed militias are fighting in Libya, and Saudi-owned news media provide critical support for the monarchy's favored factions in Tunisia and elsewhere.

The kingdom can claim limited victories, including the military-installed government in Cairo and the elected government in Tunis. But the same troubles facing its neighbors may also give Saudi Arabia's rulers reason to worry. Its efforts have not yielded any sign of stability in Syria, Iraq or Libya. A Saudi-backed transition plan in neighboring Yemen has collapsed, leaving rebels supported by Iran in charge of the capital.

"A point of strength could be interpreted as a point of weakness," one senior Arab diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity to avoid alienating the Saudis. "If everybody around you is going wrong, then your influence around your borders is decreased," the diplomat said, adding: "Frankly, everybody's influence in the Middle East has decreased. It is just a complete mess."

For an absolute monarchy tracing its dynastic roots back three hundred years, Saudi Arabia's taking a leading role in the struggle to reshape that mess is an unexpected outcome of the Arab Spring, which once stirred hopes for the rule of law and modern democracy.

"It is ironic or anachronistic if viewed from outside," said Gamal Abdel Gawad, a researcher at the state-funded Al Ahram Center for Strategic and International Studies in Cairo, and especially if one believes "the region is in urgent need of democracy."

"But the last four years have testified against that," he said, "and if the region is most in need of stability, effective governance and resources -- all of which Saudi Arabia has -- then it makes sense that it would play a leadership role, whatever the characteristics of its political system."

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia died last week with a sense of vindication, analysts and diplomats say. Robert W. Jordan, a former United States ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said that at a social visit to the royal court a few years ago, he had thanked King Abdullah "for not saying, 'I told you so.'"

The king merely chuckled. "Because the truth is he has said 'I told you so' many times, and he continued to tell current administration officials that we were really wrong," said Mr. Jordan, who was appointed by President George W. Bush.

Among the king's complaints, Mr. Jordan said: the urgency of the Bush administration's promotion of democracy, the vacuum left when the Americans withdrew from Iraq, the Obama administration's embrace of the Arab Spring revolts, and particularly the failure to fulfill threats of military action against President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

(Mr. Assad, a client of Iran, is one strongman the Saudis want to be rid of, but some analysts argue that the United States is now following the broader logic of the Saudi preference for stability over democracy by softening its demands for Mr. Assad's exit.)

"The Saudis don't want to show weakness. They don't want to show vulnerability to the winds of change in a way that might invite those changes," Mr. Jordan said, sympathizing somewhat with the Saudi desire to "manage the change rather than have it forced upon them."

"What would Saudi Arabia look like without the royal family? It would look like Libya, or Syria without Assad," Mr. Jordan said.

Like Libya under Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Saudi Arabia is controlled by a ruling family without the benefit of durable institutions in government or civil society. And like Syria, the Saudis -- now led by King Salman -- have kept a tight lid on simmering sectarian tensions between the kingdom's minority of Shiite Muslims and its Sunni rulers.

Indeed, some historians argue that Saudi Arabia often projects its domestic anxieties onto the region. Worries about tensions with Shiites at home feed its rivalry with Shiite Iran, or fears about a domestic challenge from political Islamists fuel the kingdom's hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood abroad, said Toby Jones, a historian at Rutgers University who studies Saudi Arabia.

"The Saudis say, 'These are things that need to be mastered' in the region, because they are also things that need to be mastered inside the kingdom," Professor Jones said.

As the most populous Arab state, Egypt was long considered the de facto Arab leader, the convener of the Arab League, overseer of the Israeli-Palestinian talks and main military counterweight to Iranian power. But when the revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 plunged Egypt into turmoil, Saudi Arabia "assumed its responsibilities" as regional captain, said Mr. Abdel Gawad of Egypt's Al Ahram Center.

King Abdullah also let it be known behind the scenes that he disapproved of Mr. Mubarak's ouster, castigating American officials for abandoning him. And the Saudi rulers quietly rued the subsequent election of Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood.

When Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, then a general and a former military attaché to Saudi Arabia, led a military takeover in Cairo in the summer of 2013, Saudi Arabia became his most important sponsor, quickly providing more than \$12 billion in financial assistance.

Last week, Mr. Sisi, who is now president, decreed an unusual seven days of national mourning for King Abdullah. That included canceling celebrations scheduled for Sunday to mark the fourth anniversary of the Arab Spring -- a step activists here took as recognition of King Abdullah's role in the revolt's undoing.

Nabil Fahmy, the foreign minister in Egypt's transitional government after the takeover, said the Saudis were only a "complementary player" to the domestic backlash against the Brotherhood.

"The Saudis came out very quickly and said they supported us, sure," he said. "But frankly this was going to happen."

Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, is now committed to sustaining Mr. Sisi's government with billions of dollars in aid, probably for years to come. Egypt burned through about \$20 billion from Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies in just the first year after the military takeover without much change to the government's balance sheet, and Egypt's currency is at a new low against the dollar.

"Yes, it is a burden, undoubtedly, especially with the drop in the price of oil," said Mustafa Alani, an analyst at the Gulf Research Center who is close to the Saudi government. "But they are ready to stand behind the Egyptian economy for quite a long time, because the strategic cost of the failure would be even more of a burden if Egypt collapses."

In addition to Saudi Arabia's role in Bahrain and Iraq, it is taking a role in hosting American efforts to train rebels fighting Mr. Assad's forces in Syria.

The Saudis' Al Arabiya satellite network and other regional media outlets provide sympathetic coverage of the law-and-order, anti-Brotherhood factions in every country in the region. And Riyadh is providing indirect support for the anti-Islamist faction fighting for power in Libya, through its client, Egypt, and its allies, the Emirates.

In Tunisia, the Saudis contributed financial aid to help stabilize the government and lent public "moral support" to the anti-Islamist leaders, Mr. Alani said, helping the security-first political faction remove the Islamist party from power through democratic elections.

"Tunisia did not need a lot," Mr. Alani said, "but the Saudis have done what they needed to do."

Saudi Arabia has emerged as the regional leader because "they were able to stand the storm," he said. "So now they feel that, 'yes, you survived, great, but you need to stabilize the environment around you if you want to survive longer.' "

Still, Mr. Jones, the historian, said it was too soon to judge. "They are backing the same cast of characters that landed them in a vulnerable position in the first place," when the Arab Spring shook the region in 2011, he said. "This just turns back the clock."

It is the weakness of the existing order, he said, "that has produced the effect of making the Saudis look even more powerful, because they are the only ones left with enough power and resources to prop it up."

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9. Two Deaths Stand Out in Violence in Egypt

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A8 | David D. Kirkpatrick

CAIRO -- At least 18 people were killed in political violence in Egypt on Sunday, the fourth anniversary of the Arab Spring uprising, a reminder of the ruthless crackdown the military-backed government has used to silence any echoes of that revolt.

Security officials said three of those killed were militants trying to plant bombs that accidentally exploded in two Nile Delta towns, and three others were police conscripts. At least 12 others were civilians killed by security forces.

As many as 10 civilians were killed in clashes in the Matariya district, a frequent flash point on the northern edge of Cairo, and dozens of civilians were reportedly injured in clashes at scattered protests around the country.

After nearly 18 months of recurring police shootings at street protests since the military takeover in 2013, it was the deaths of two others killed over the weekend that most captured Egypt's attention.

Sondos Reda Abu Bakr, a 17-year-old high school student, was killed Friday by police officers firing birdshot at a demonstration in Alexandria in support of ousted President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. And Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, 32, a left-leaning poet and activist, was killed in Cairo. She was a member of a socialist political party that had supported President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the military takeover he led in 2013.

Neither of the women was likely to have posed any threat.

Ms. Sabbagh was walking in a small group of fellow party members on Saturday with a wreath of flowers to lay in Tahrir Square to honor demonstrators killed there during previous protests, according to a witness account and a video recording of the scene. When her group took up the Arab Spring chant for "bread freedom and social justice," a contingent of masked riot police officers as numerous as the marchers "fired bullets and gas within minutes," according to a testimonial posted on Facebook by Azza Soliman, a prominent human rights lawyer who was nearby at the time.

In the video, the police officers are seen firing guns from across a narrow street. A friend, crouching down, grabs Ms. Sabbagh around the waist as she stands upright with blood running down her face. Then he is seen hurriedly carrying her away while the gunfire continues. A forensic report said birdshot fired at close range had pierced her lung and heart, according to news reports.

The deaths on the anniversary of the revolt were predictable, rights activists say, because the swift use of firearms has become de facto police policy toward any unauthorized public assembly, especially in downtown Cairo. On the anniversary last year, more than 50 people died in clashes with the police.

But the arresting stories of the two unarmed women, and most of all the vivid images of Ms. Sabbagh's death, have dramatized the police violence more effectively than any statistics, rights advocates say.

"She is a member of a very tame opposition party, by no means a revolutionary, and yet she is subjected to this brutal force," said Amr Abdel Rahman, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

"The streets are becoming much less safe for Egyptian activists from any walk of the political spectrum than it was even last year," he said.

Gamal Eid, executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, noted that only a small demonstration in support of President Sisi appeared to have escaped police violence. So the police killings, including Ms. Sabbagh's, had sent a clear message.

"If you object to Sisi, your blood is permissible," Mr. Eid said, arguing that Mr. Sisi's police force was clenching its fist even more tightly than former President Hosni Mubarak's -- "with all its monstrosity."

"We are closer to the Gestapo in East Germany or the Savak political police of Iran" under the Shah, Mr. Eid added.

Unable to dismiss Ms. Sabbagh as a violent agitator or an Islamist militant, Egyptian officials and the government's supporters have begun to speculate improbably that someone other than the police may have fired the shot that killed her.

"We need a clear answer: Who killed Shaimaa Sabbagh?" the pro-government television talk-show host Lamees Hadidi asked, as though it were a mystery.

A spokesman for the Egyptian Interior Ministry, Maj. Gen. Hany Abdel Latif, raised the same question, saying the police could not have killed Ms. Sabbagh.

"I assure you that all the security apparatuses are working to find out who did this," he said in an interview. "No one is above the law." He vigorously disputed the accounts of witnesses and rights groups that the police invariably resort to birdshot when dispersing any crowd. "This is completely unacceptable."

But he also argued that the police had been justified in breaking up even Ms. Sabbagh's small march of a few dozen people trying to lay flowers in the square.

The protest law, Mr. Abdel Latif said, bans even small gatherings without authorization, and he said Ms. Sabbagh's friends had shot off firecrackers in the direction of the police -- contradicting multiple witnesses as well as the video.

"They were youth, and they shot fireworks at the police, as well as cut off a public road," Mr. Abdel Latif said. "The police used tear gas, and six were arrested."

Still, Ms. Soliman, the lawyer who witnessed the shooting, is standing firmly by her account. "It was the police who killed Shaimaa," she wrote.

But if the ministry's official account may not convince many, its tactics have nonetheless deterred them.

Hundreds gathered in Ms. Sabbagh's hometown, Alexandria, on Sunday to march from her home to the Manarah Cemetery for her burial, and they chanted against the Interior Ministry and "military rule."

But afraid of coming under attack themselves, some in the crowd also chanted against the Muslim Brotherhood, to be sure that no one assaulted them as a part of the outlawed Islamist groups, said Hakim Abdelnaem, a friend and political ally of Ms. Sabbagh.

"There were many calls for protests," he said. "But the streets are full of the government, with informants everywhere, and any protests can expect to be immediately attacked by the police, any groups that tries to do anything is faced with very violent confrontation without warning."

So the mourners canceled the protests, Mr. Abdelnaem said. "It was decided that there was no need to lose more people today."

--Merna Thomas contributed reporting from Alexandria, Egypt

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10. Disillusioned by War, Israeli Soldiers Muted in 1967 Are Given Fuller Voice

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A4 | Jodi Rudoren

TEL AVIV -- A young Israeli soldier, fresh from the front, bluntly recounts the orders from above. "They never said, 'Leave no one alive,' but they said, 'Show no mercy,' " he explains. "The brigade commander said to kill as many as possible."

Another recalls encountering Arabs on rooftops. "They're civilians -- should I kill them or not?" he asks himself. "I didn't even think about it. Just kill! Kill everyone you see." And a third makes it personal: "All of us -- Avinoam, Zvika, Yitzhaki -- we're not murderers. In the war, we all became murderers."

The wrenching, taped testimony is not from last summer's bloody battle in the Gaza Strip but from the 1967 war, when Israel started out fighting Egypt, Jordan and Syria for its very survival and ended up seizing the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula and parts of the Golan Heights. As the International Criminal Court considers a war crimes investigation in the recent conflict, a new documentary film is showcasing previously unaired admissions of brutal behavior by an earlier generation.

The film, "Censored Voices," premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on Saturday, the latest in a series of movies by leftist Israeli filmmakers who have won awards abroad by presenting harsh looks at their own society. Based on interviews that the military heavily edited at the time, it includes accounts of Israelis summarily executing prisoners and evacuating Arab villages in a manner that one fighter likened to the Nazis' treatment of European Jews.

The director, Mor Loushy, said in an interview that she was trying to revamp the prevailing Israeli narrative of triumph in 1967 in light of all that has happened since, and that the film "is very relevant for today."

But with Israel increasingly in a defensive crouch on the international stage, the film raises concerns that, viewed without consideration for the existential threat Israel faced at the time, it could become catnip for contemporary critics.

"People abroad who don't remember the way we do the circumstances of the Six-Day War will turn this into one more indictment of Israel," said Yossi Klein Halevi, whose 2013 book, "Like Dreamers," followed the lives of a group of 1967 veterans. "If there were isolated acts of abuse by our soldiers, that should not become the narrative about what the Six-Day War was about. Many of us here are, frankly, sick and tired of the blame-Israel-first narrative."

Asked to respond to the film, Lt. Col. Peter Lerner of the Israel Defense Forces said it was "representative of Israel's vibrant democracy, where everything can be and is openly discussed," but not particularly pertinent to current debates over military conduct. While 1967 was a war between sovereign states, Colonel Lerner noted, today Israel faces "belligerent nonstate or semistate" actors with weapons "dispersed within the civilian arena."

"Any attempt to draw similarities between the two," he said in an email, "is weak and nonrepresentative of how warfare has developed, how the battlefield has evolved and how today terrorism takes precedence over traditional warfare."

The 84-minute film had a budget under \$1 million, financed mainly by Israeli and European broadcasters and the American documentary producer Impact Partners. Interspersing the 1967 interviews with archival footage from the war and ABC News's coverage of it, it does make clear the imminent threat to Israel -- and then the stunning turnabout that military historians have long considered a marvel.

Beyond the accounts of killing prisoners and civilians, perhaps the most striking element of the film is that within a week or two of the war's end, these soldiers -- from Israel's socialist kibbutz movement -- questioned its wisdom.

"I think that in the next round the Arabs' hatred towards us will be much more serious and profound," one says. Already ambivalent about the occupation of Palestinian territory, another worries, "Not only did this war not solve the state's problems, but it complicated them in a way that'll be very hard to solve."

As Ms. Loushy put it, "This is the story of men who went out to war feeling like they had to defend their life, and they were right, of course, but they went out in one position and came back as conquerors."

"If those voices had been published in 1967," she said, "maybe our reality here would be different."

Some of the voices were published at the time in "A Conversation With Warriors," a collection edited by Avraham Shapira that sold a stunning 120,000 copies in Israel. (The English-language version is called "The Seventh Day.") Mr. Halevi said its publication "was the moment when part of Israeli society started sobering up from the euphoria."

When Ms. Loushy, 32, tripped across a copy doing research for a history paper, she was riveted by how different its tone was from the 1967 story she had learned in school. She cajoled Mr. Shapira, an aging kibbutznik and philosophy professor, to share the original audiotaped interviews that he had denied to legions of journalists and historians.

"If you listen -- not hearing but listening -- to the recordings, there is a symphony of sounds: There are screams, crying, real weeping," Mr. Shapira said in an interview. "They anticipated what can happen if we'll not work immediately for peace, practically to return back all the occupied territories. They express it as an inner feeling, no politics."

He said current soldiers had told him that they found in these old interviews "a deep, personal expression of their own moral and human dilemmas."

Ms. Loushy, whose previous film, "Israel Ltd.," attempted to unmask Zionist propaganda tours, listened to 200 hours of tapes over eight months, much of which the censors had blocked from publication in the book. She was deep into the project before she discovered that the film, too, would be subject to censorship, she said.

Israel forbids the filmmakers to reveal how much they were forced to change, and the military censor's office refused to discuss it.

"For us as a society to mend and to improve ourselves, we can't censor," Ms. Loushy said. "I think it's important that we look the truth in the eyes."

The film's star is the original reel-to-reel tape recorder that Mr. Shapira bought in 1967. It replays the interviews as the soldiers -- now graying, wrinkled men -- sit alongside, sometimes closing their eyes or cringing a bit. Only in the final few minutes do some of them speak, briefly. One says he has become "less Zionist, less patriotic, less of a believer," and another says, "I'm much more right wing than before."

Pinchas Leviatan, 73, a retired horticulturalist and teacher, said in an interview that when Ms. Loushy had come to his home and played the tape, he had not recognized the voice, "but when I heard what I said, I was sure that it was me." He had been telling the same stories to students for years.

In the film, Mr. Leviatan talks of being emotionally broken by seeing the humiliation of Egyptian soldiers after the fighting, when they "came with canteens filled with urine" and, upon being given water, "threw up on our feet and kissed us." He is one of the Israeli soldiers whose views have changed with time.

"I was convinced that the peace is coming, and maybe after the Six-Day War I was hoping that it's going to happen," he said in the interview. "I was very naïve. I participated in another five wars as a commanding officer. The fact is that during the years, I lost my belief in the possibility of getting any solution in the area."

--Irit Pazner Garshowitz contributed reporting

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IRAQ/SYRIA

11. Syria's President Speaks

A Conversation With Bashar al-Assad

Foreign Affairs Online, Jan. 26 | Jonathan Tepperman

The civil war in Syria will soon enter its fifth year, with no end in sight. On January 20, Foreign Affairs managing editor Jonathan Tepperman met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to discuss the conflict in an exclusive interview.

I would like to start by asking you about the war. It has now been going on for almost four years, and you know the statistics: more than 200,000 people have been killed, a million wounded, and more than three million Syrians have fled the country, according to the UN. Your forces have also suffered heavy casualties. The war cannot go on forever. How do you see the war ending?

All wars anywhere in the world have ended with a political solution, because war itself is not the solution; war is one of the instruments of politics. So you end with a political solution. That's how we see it. That is the headline.

You don't think that this war will end militarily?

No. Any war ends with a political solution.

Your country is increasingly divided into three ministates: one controlled by the government, one controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and one controlled by the more secular Sunni and Kurdish opposition. How will you ever put Syria back together again?

First of all, this image is not accurate, because you cannot talk about ministates without talking about the people who live within those states. The Syrian people are still with the unity of Syria; they still support the government. The factions you refer to control some areas, but they move from one place to another—they are not stable, and there are no clear lines of separation between different forces. Sometimes they mingle with each other and they move. But the main issue is about the population. The population still supports the state regardless of whether they support it politically or not; I mean they support the state as the representative of the unity of Syria. So as long as you have the Syrian people believing in unity, any government and any official can unify Syria. If the people are divided into two, three, or four groups, no one can unify this country. That's how we see it.

You really think that the Sunnis and the Kurds still believe in a unified Syria?

If you go to Damascus now, you can see all the different, let's say, colors of our society living together. So the divisions in Syria are not based on sectarian or ethnic grounds. And even in the Kurdish area you are talking about,

we have two different colors: we have Arabs more than Kurds. So it's not about the ethnicity; it's about the factions that control certain areas militarily.

A year ago, both the opposition and foreign governments were insisting that you step down as a precondition to talks. They no longer are. Diplomats are now looking for an interim settlement that would allow you to keep a role. Just today, The New York Times had an article that talked about increased U.S. support for the Russian and UN peace initiatives. The article refers to "the West's quiet retreat from its demands that Syria's president step down immediately." Given this shift in the Western attitude, are you now more open to a negotiated solution to the conflict that leads to a political transition?

From the very beginning, we were open. We engaged in dialogue with every party in Syria. Party doesn't mean political party; it could be a party, a current, or some personality; it could be any political entity. We changed the constitution, and we are open to anything. But when you want to do something, it's not about the opposition or about the government; it's about the Syrians. Sometimes you might have a majority that doesn't belong to any side. So when you want to make a change, as long as you're talking about a national problem, every Syrian must have a say in it. When you have a dialogue, it's not between the government and the opposition; it's between the different Syrian parties and entities. That's how we look at dialogue. This is first. Second, whatever solution you want to make, at the end you should go back to the people through a referendum, because you're talking about the constitution, changing the political system, whatever. You have to go back to the Syrian people. So engaging in a dialogue is different from taking decisions, which is not done by the government or the opposition.

So you're saying that you would not agree to any kind of political transition unless there is a referendum that supports it?

Exactly. The people should make the decision, not anyone else.

Does that mean there's no room for negotiations?

No, we will go to Russia, we will go to these negotiations, but there is another question here: Who do you negotiate with? As a government, we have institutions, we have an army, and we have influence, positive or negative, in any direction, at any time. Whereas the people we are going to negotiate with, who do they represent? That's the question. When you talk about the opposition, it has to have meaning. The opposition in general has to have representatives in the local administration, in the parliament, in institutions; they have to have grass roots to represent on their behalf. In the current crisis, you have to ask about the opposition's influence on the ground. You have to go back to what the rebels announced publicly, when they said many times that the opposition doesn't represent us—they have no influence. If you want to talk about fruitful dialogue, it's going to be between the government and those rebels. There is another point. Opposition means national; it means working for the interests of the Syrian people. It cannot be an opposition if it's a puppet of Qatar or Saudi Arabia or any Western country, including the United States, paid from the outside. It should be Syrian. We have a national opposition. I'm not excluding it; I'm not saying every opposition is not legitimate. But you have to separate the national and the puppets. Not every dialogue is fruitful.

Does that mean you would not want to meet with opposition forces that are backed by outside countries?

We are going to meet with everyone. We don't have conditions.

No conditions?

No conditions.

You would meet with everyone?

Yes, we're going to meet with everyone. But you have to ask each one of them: Who do you represent? That's what I mean.

If I'm correct, the deputy of the UN representative Staffan de Mistura is in Syria now. They're proposing as an interim measure a cease-fire and a freeze in Aleppo. Would you agree to that?

Yes, of course. We implemented that before de Mistura was assigned to his mission. We implemented it in another city called Homs, another big city. We implemented it on smaller scales in different, let's say, suburbs, villages, and so on, and it succeeded. So the idea is very good, but it depends on the details. De Mistura came to Syria with headlines. We agreed upon certain headlines, and now we are waiting for him to bring a detailed plan or schedule—A-to-Z plan, let's say. We are discussing this with his deputy.

In the past, you insisted as a precondition for a cease-fire that the rebels lay down their weapons first, which obviously from their perspective was a nonstarter. Is that still your precondition?

We choose different scenarios or different reconciliations. In some areas, we allowed them to leave inhabited areas in order to prevent casualties among civilians. They left these areas with their armaments. In other areas, they gave up their armaments and they left. It depends on what they offer and what you offer.

I'm not clear on your answer. Would you insist that they lay down their weapons?

No, no. That's not what I mean. In some areas, they left the area with their armaments—that is what I mean.

Are you optimistic about the Moscow talks?

What is going on in Moscow is not negotiations about the solution; it's only preparations for the conference.

So talks about talks?

Exactly—how to prepare for the talks. So when you start talking about the conference, what are the principles of the conference? I'll go back to the same point. Let me be frank: some of the groups are puppets, as I said, of other countries. They have to implement that agenda, and I know that many countries, like France, for example, do not have any interest in making that conference succeed. So they will give them orders to make them fail. You have other personalities who only represent themselves; they don't represent anyone in Syria. Some of them never lived in Syria, and they know nothing about the country. Of course, you have some other personalities who work for the national interest. So when you talk about the opposition as one entity, who's going to have influence on the other? That is the question. It's not clear yet. So optimism would be an exaggeration. I wouldn't say I'm pessimistic. I would say we have hope, in every action.

It seems that in recent days, the Americans have become more supportive of the Moscow talks. Initially, they were not. Yesterday, Secretary of State Kerry said something to suggest that the United States hopes that the talks go forward and that they are successful.

They always say things, but it's about what they're going to do. And you know there's mistrust between the Syrians and the U.S. So just wait till we see what will happen at the conference.

So what do you see as the best way to strike a deal between all the different parties in Syria?

It's to deal directly with the rebels, but you have two different kinds of rebels. Now, the majority are al Qaeda, which is ISIS and al-Nusra, with other similar factions that belong to al Qaeda but are smaller. Now, what's left, what Obama called the "fantasy," what he called the "moderate opposition"—it's not an opposition; they are rebels. Most of them joined al Qaeda, and some of them rejoined the army recently. During the last week, a lot of them left those groups and came to the army.

Are these former defectors who came back?

Yes, they came back to the army. They said, "We don't want to fight anymore." So what's left of those is very little. At the end, can you negotiate with al Qaeda, and others? They are not ready to negotiate; they have their own plan. The reconciliation that we started and Mr. de Mistura is going to continue is the practical solution on the ground. This is the first point. Second, you have to implement the Security Council resolution, no. 2170, on al-Nusra and ISIS, which was issued a few months ago, and this resolution is very clear about preventing anyone from supporting these factions militarily, financially, or logistically. Yet this is what Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are still doing. If it's not implemented, we cannot talk about a real solution, because there will be obstacles as long as they spend money. So this is how we can start. Third, the Western countries should remove the umbrella still referred to by some as "supporting the moderate opposition." They know we have mainly al Qaeda, ISIS, and al-Nusra.

Would you be prepared to take any confidence-building measures in advance of the talks? For example, prisoner exchanges, or ending the use of barrel bombs, or releasing political prisoners, in order to build confidence on the other side that you're willing to negotiate in good faith?

It's not a personal relationship; it's about mechanisms. In politics, you only talk about mechanisms. You don't have to trust someone to do something. If you have a clear mechanism, you can reach a result. That is what the people want. So the question is, what is the mechanism that we can put in place? This takes us back to the same question: Who are they? What do they represent? What's their influence? What is the point of building trust with people with no influence?

When two parties come together, it's often very useful for one party to show the other that it's really interested in making progress by taking steps unilaterally to try and bring down the temperature. The measures that I described would have that effect.

You have something concrete, and that is reconciliation. People gave up their armaments; we gave them amnesty; they live normal lives. It is a real example. So this is a measure of confidence. On the other hand, what is the relation between that opposition and the prisoners? There's no relation. They are not their prisoners anyway. So it is completely a different issue.

So have you offered amnesty to fighters?

Yes, of course, and we did it many times.

How many—do you have numbers?

I don't have the precise numbers, but it's thousands, not hundreds, thousands of militants.

And are you prepared to say to the entire opposition that if you lay down your weapons, you will be safe?

Yes, I said it publicly in one of my speeches.

And how can you guarantee their safety? Because they have reasons to distrust your government.

You cannot. But at the end, let's say that if more than 50 percent succeed, more than 50 percent in such circumstances would be a success. So that's how. Nothing is absolute. You have to expect some negative aspects, but they are not the major aspects.

Let me change the subject slightly. Hezbollah, Iran's Quds Force, and Iranian-trained Shiite militias are all now playing significant roles in the fight against rebels here in Syria. Given this involvement, are you worried about Iran's influence over the country? After all, Iraq or even Lebanon shows that once a foreign military power becomes established in a country, it can be very difficult to get them to leave again.

Iran is an important country in this region, and it was influential before the crisis: Its influence is not related to the crisis; it's related to its role, its political position in general. When you talk about influence, various factors make a certain country influential. In the Middle East, in our region, you have the same society, the same ideology, many similar things, the same tribes, going across borders. So if you have influence on one factor, your influence will be crossing the border. This is part of our nature. It's not related to the conflict. Of course, when there is conflict and anarchy, another country will be more influential in your country. When you don't have the will to have a sovereign country, you will have that influence. Now, the answer to your question is, Iran doesn't have any ambitions in Syria, and as a country, as Syria, we would never allow any country to influence our sovereignty. We wouldn't accept it, and the Iranians don't want it either. We allow cooperation. But if you allowed any country to have influence, why not allow the Americans to have influence in Syria? That's the problem with the Americans and with the West: they want to have influence without cooperation.

Let me just push you a little bit further. Last week, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, of their airspace command, Hajizadeh, said in an interview in Der Spiegel that Iran's supreme leader has ordered his forces to build and operate missile plants in Syria. That suggests that Iran is playing a greater role and doing it on its own.

No, no. Playing a role through cooperation is different from playing a role through hegemony.

So everything that Iran is doing ... ?

Of course, in full cooperation with the Syrian government, and that's always the case.

Now Iran is one thing to deal with because it's a country. But you also have militias, which are substate actors and therefore more complicated. One problem with working with these groups is that, unlike a government, they may not be willing to cooperate and it's not always clear who to talk to. Are you worried about your ability to control these forces and to rein them in if you need to? And, a related question, this week, Israel attacked Hezbollah forces in the Golan Heights, and the Israelis suggest that they attacked them because Hezbollah was planning an attack on Israel from Syrian territory. Doesn't this also highlight the danger of allowing militias with their own agendas, not necessarily your agenda, to come into the war?

Do you mean Syrian, or any other militias in general?

I mean especially Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias.

It's natural to say that only the institutions of the government, of the state, let's say, are the guarantee for stability and to put things in order. Any other factor that would play a role in parallel with the government could be positive, could be good in certain circumstances, but it will always have side effects, negative side effects. That is a natural thing. And having militias who support the government is a side effect of the war. You have it, but you're going to try to control this side effect. Nobody will feel more comfortable than if they are dealing with government institutions, including the army and the police and so on. But talking about what happened in Quneitra is something completely different. Never has an operation against Israel happened through the Golan Heights since the cease-fire in 1974. It has never happened. So for Israel to allege that there was a plan for an operation—that's a far cry from reality, just an excuse, because they wanted to assassinate somebody from Hezbollah.

But the Israelis have been very careful since the war began to not get involved except when they felt their interests were directly threatened.

That's not true, because they've been attacking Syria now for nearly two years, without any reason.

But in each case, they say it's because Hezbollah was being given weapons from Iran through Syria.

They attacked army positions. What is the relation between Hezbollah and the army?

Those were cases where the army accidentally shelled ...

Those are false allegations.

So what do you think Israel's agenda is?

They are supporting the rebels in Syria. It's very clear. Because whenever we make advances in some place, they make an attack in order to undermine the army. It's very clear. That's why some in Syria joke: "How can you say that al Qaeda doesn't have an air force? They have the Israeli air force."

To return to my question about militias, do you feel confident that you'll be able to control them when this war ends? Because after all, to have effective sovereignty, any government has to have what's called a monopoly of force, and that's very hard when you have these independent armed groups running around.

That's self-evident: the state cannot fulfill its commitment to society if it's not the only master of order.

But you see in Iraq how hard that is. It is now very difficult for the government to control all the Shiite militias that were empowered during the war.

There's a very important reason in Iraq: it's because Paul Bremer didn't create a constitution for the state; he created one for factions. Whereas in Syria, why did the army stand fast for four years in spite of this embargo, this war, tens of countries around the world attacking Syria and supporting the rebels? Because it has a real constitution, a real, secular constitution. That is the reason. In Iraq, it is sectarian. When you talk about a sectarian constitution, it's not a constitution.

But what will you do about these militias when the war ends?

Things should go back to normal, like before the war.

And you're confident ... ?

Yes. We don't have any other option. That is the role of the government. This is self-evident.

What impact are falling oil prices having on the war in Syria? After all, your two closest allies and supporters, Iran and Russia, are very dependent on oil prices, and they have suffered tremendous damage to their budgets in recent months as the price of oil has fallen. Do you worry about their ability to continue helping you?

No, because they don't give us money, so it has no effect on Syria. Even if they are going to help us, it would be in the form of loans. We're like any other country: we have loans. Sometimes we pay; sometimes we take loans.

But their military support costs them money, and if they have less money to pay for their own militaries, won't that become a problem?

No, because when you pay for armaments or any other goods, you don't have a problem.

So you're saying everything you're getting from the Russians and the Iranians ... ?

So far, we haven't seen any changes, so what the influence is on them, I cannot answer.

You've said in past interviews that you and your government have made mistakes in the course of the war. What are those mistakes? Is there anything that you regret?

Every government, every person, makes mistakes, so that's again self-evident; it's a given. But if you want to talk about political mistakes, you have to ask yourself, what are the major decisions that you took since the crisis started? We took three main decisions: First of all, to be open to all dialogue. Second, we changed the constitution and the law according to what many in the opposition were saying, allegedly, that this is the reason of the crisis. Third, we took the decision to defend our country, to defend ourselves, to fight terrorists. So I don't think those three decisions can be described as wrong or mistakes. If you want to talk about practice, any official in any place can make mistakes, but there's a difference between practice mistakes and policy mistakes.

Can you describe some of the practical mistakes?

I would have to go back to officials on the ground; there's nothing in my mind. I would rather talk about policies.

Do you feel there have been any policy mistakes that you're responsible for?

I mentioned the major decisions.

But you said those are not mistakes.

To defend the country from terrorism? If I wanted to say that it's a mistake, then to be correct would be to support the terrorists.

I'm just wondering if there's anything you did that you wish in retrospect you had done differently.

Regarding these three main decisions, they were correct, and I am confident about this.

In terms of lower-level practical mistakes, are people being held accountable, say, for human rights abuses, for the excessive use of force, or the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, those kinds of things?

Yes. Some people were detained because they breached the law in that regard, and that happens of course in such circumstances.

In terms of their treatment of civilians or protesters, is that what you're referring to?

Yes, during the protests at the very beginning, yes.

Since the United States began its air campaign against the Islamic State, Syria and the United States have become strange kinds of partners and are effectively cooperating in that aspect of the fight. Do you see the potential for increased cooperation with the United States?

Yes, the potential is definitely always there, because we've been talking about or asking for international cooperation against terrorism for 30 years. But this potential needs will. The question that we have is, how much will does the United States have to really fight terrorism on the ground? So far, we haven't seen anything concrete in spite of the attacks on ISIS in northern Syria. There's nothing concrete. What we've seen so far is just, let's say, window-dressing, nothing real. Since the beginning of these attacks, ISIS has gained more land in Syria and Iraq.

What about the air strikes on Kobani? Those have been effective in slowing down ISIS.

Kobani is a small city, with about 50,000 inhabitants. It's been more than three months since the beginning of the attacks, and they haven't finished. Same areas, same al Qaeda factions occupying them—the Syrian army liberated in less than three weeks. It means they're not serious about fighting terrorism.

So are you saying you want greater U.S. involvement in the war against ISIS?

It's not about greater involvement by the military, because it's not only about the military; it's about politics. It's about how much the United States wants to influence the Turks. Because if the terrorists can withstand the air strikes for this period, it means that the Turks keep sending them armaments and money. Did the United States put any pressure on Turkey to stop the support of al Qaeda? They didn't; they haven't. So it's not only about military involvement. This is first. Second, if you want to talk about the military involvement, American officials publicly acknowledge that without troops on the ground, they cannot achieve anything concrete. Which troops on the grounds are you depending on?

So are you suggesting there should be U.S. troops on the ground?

Not U.S. troops. I'm talking about the principle, the military principle. I'm not saying American troops. If you want to say I want to make war on terrorism, you have to have troops on the ground. The question you have to ask the Americans is, which troops are you going to depend on? Definitely, it has to be Syrian troops. This is our land; this is our country. We are responsible. We don't ask for American troops at all.

So what would you like to see from the United States? You mentioned more pressure on Turkey ...

Pressure on Turkey, pressure on Saudi Arabia, pressure on Qatar to stop supporting the rebels. Second, to make legal cooperation with Syria and start by asking permission from our government to make such attacks. They didn't, so it's illegal.

I'm sorry, I'm not clear on that point. You want them to make legal ... ?

Of course, if you want to make any kind of action in another country, you ask their permission.

I see. So a formal agreement between Washington and Damascus to allow for air strikes?

The format we can discuss later, but you start with permission. Is it an agreement? Is it a treaty? That's another issue.

And would you be willing to take steps to make cooperation easier with Washington?

With any country that is serious about fighting terrorism, we are ready to make cooperation, if they're serious.

What steps would you be prepared to make to show Washington that you're willing to cooperate?

I think they are the ones who have to show the will. We are already fighting on the ground; we don't have to show that.

The United States is currently training 5,000 Syrian fighters who are scheduled to enter Syria in May. Now, U.S. General John Allen has been very careful to say that these troops will not be directed at the Syrian government, but will be focused on ISIS alone. What will you do when these troops enter the country? Will you allow them to enter? Will you attack them?

Any troops that don't work in cooperation with the Syrian army are illegal and should be fought. That's very clear.

Even if this brings you into conflict with the United States?

Without cooperation with Syrian troops, they are illegal, and are puppets of another country, so they are going to be fought like any other illegal militia fighting against the Syrian army. But that brings another question, about those troops. Obama said that they are a fantasy. How did fantasy become reality?

I think with this kind of training program.

But you can't make extremism moderate.

There are still some moderate members of the opposition. They are weaker and weaker all the time, but I think the U.S. government is trying very carefully to ensure that the fighters it trains are not radicals.

But the question is, why is the moderate opposition—if you call them opposition; we call them rebels—why are they weaker and weaker? They are still weaker because of developments in the Syrian crisis. Bringing 5,000 from the outside will make most of them defect and join ISIS and other groups, which is what happened during the last year. So that's why I said it's still illusory. It is not the 5,000 that are illusory but the idea itself that is illusory.

Part of what makes Washington so reluctant to cooperate with you more formally are the allegations of serious human rights abuses by your government. These allegations aren't just from the U.S. government; they are also from the UN Human Rights Commission, the independent Special Investigative Commission of the UN. You are familiar with these allegations, I'm sure. They include denying access for relief groups to refugee camps, indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, photo evidence provided by the defector code-named Caesar, who made a presentation to the U.S. Congress showing terrible torture and abuse in Syrian prisons. Are you prepared to take action on these issues in order to make cooperation with the United States easier?

The funny thing about this administration is that it's the first one in history to build its evaluation and later decisions on social media. We call it a social media administration, which is not politics. None of these allegations you mentioned are concrete; all of them are allegations. You can bring photos from anyone and say this is torture. Who took the pictures? Who is he? Nobody knows. There is no verification of any of this evidence, so it's all allegations without evidence.

But Caesar's photos have been looked at by independent European investigators.

No, no. It's funded by Qatar, and they say it's an anonymous source. So nothing is clear or proven. The pictures are not clear which person they show. They're just pictures of a head, for example, with some skulls. Who said this is done by the government, not by the rebels? Who said this is a Syrian victim, not someone else? For example, photos published at the beginning of the crisis were from Iraq and Yemen. Second, the United States in particular and the West in general are in no position to talk about human rights. They are responsible for most of the killings in the region, especially the United States after getting into Iraq, and the United Kingdom after invading Libya, and the situation in Yemen, and what happened in Egypt in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and terrorism in Tunisia. All these problems happened because of the United States. They were the first ones to trample international law and Security Council resolutions, not us.

That may or may not be true, but those are separate issues, and that does not absolve your government of responsibility.

No, no. The United States accused, so we have to answer that part. I'm not saying if there's any human rights breach or infringement, the government has no responsibility. That is another issue. The second part of your question is about the allegations. They're still allegations. If you want me to answer, I have to answer about something that is concrete, proved, and verified.

Are you prepared to categorically deny that there's torture and abuse of prisoners in Syria?

If there's any unbiased and fair way to verify all those allegations, of course we are ready. That would be in our interest.

What impact would a U.S.-Iranian nuclear deal have on Syria?

Nothing, because the crisis here was never part of the negotiations, and Iran refused to make it such. And that is correct, because there is no link between the two.

But many in the United States anticipate that if Iran and the United States strike a deal, it will make cooperation between the two countries much easier. People therefore wonder if Iran might decide to reduce its support for Syria as a favor to the U.S. government.

We have never had any positive information about such a thing, never. I cannot discuss something which I don't have any information about.

Describe whether you think the war is going well from the government's perspective. Independent analysts have suggested that your government currently controls 45 to 50 percent of the territory of Syria.

First of all, if you want to describe the arena—it's not a war between two countries, between two armies where you have an incursion and you lost some territory that you want to regain. It's not like this. We're talking about rebels that infiltrate areas inhabited by civilians. You have Syrian terrorists that support foreign terrorists to come and hide among civilians. They launch what you call guerrilla attacks. That is the shape of this war, so you cannot look at it as being about territory. Second, wherever the Syrian army has wanted to go, it has succeeded. But the Syrian army cannot have a presence on every kilometer of Syrian territory. That's impossible. We made some advances in the past two years. But if you want to ask me, "Is it going well?" I say that every war is bad, because you always lose, you always have destruction in a war. The main question is, what have we won in this war? What we won in this war is that the Syrian people have rejected the terrorists; the Syrian people support their government more; the Syrian people support their army more. Before talking about winning territory, talk about winning the hearts and minds and the support of the Syrian people. That's what we have won. What's left is logistical; it's technical. That is a matter of time. The war is moving in a positive way. But that doesn't mean you're not losing on the national level. Because you lose lives, you lose infrastructure; the war itself has very bad social effects.

Do you think you will eventually defeat the rebels militarily?

If they don't have external support, and no, let's say, supply and recruitment of new terrorists within Syria, there will be no problem defeating them. Even today we don't have a problem militarily. The problem is that they still have this continuous supply, mainly from Turkey.

So Turkey seems to be the neighbor that you're most concerned about?

Exactly. Logistically, and about terrorist financing from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but through Turkey.

Do you blame Erdogan personally? This is a man you once had a fairly good relationship with.

Yes. Because he belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which is the base of al Qaeda; it was the first political Islamic organization that promoted violent political Islam in the early twentieth century. He belongs strongly and is a staunch believer in these values. He's very fanatical, and that's why he still supports ISIS. He is personally responsible for what happened.

Do you see any other potential partners in the region? For example, General el-Sisi in Egypt?

I wouldn't talk about him personally, but as long as Egypt and the Egyptian army and the government are fighting the same kind of terrorists as in Iraq, of course, we can consider these countries eligible to cooperate with in fighting the same enemy.

Two final questions, if I may. Can you imagine a scenario in which Syria returns to the status quo as it was before the fighting started almost four years ago?

In what sense?

In the sense that Syria is whole again, it is not divided, it controls its borders, it starts to rebuild, and it is at peace and a predominantly secular country.

If you look at a military map now, the Syrian army exists in every corner. Not every place; by every corner, I mean north, south, east, west, and between. If you didn't believe in a unified Syria, that Syria can go back to its previous position, you wouldn't send the army there, as a government. If you don't believe in this as a people, you would have seen people in Syria isolated into different ghettos based on ethnic and sectarian or religious identity. As long as this is not the situation, the people live with each other; the army is everywhere; the army is made up of every color of Syrian society, or the Syrian fabric. This means that we all believe Syria should go back to the way it was. We don't have any other option, because if it doesn't go back to its previous position, that will affect every surrounding country. It's one fabric—it's a domino effect that will have influence from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

If you were able to deliver a message to President Obama today, what would it be?

I think the normal thing that you ask any official in the world is to work for the interests of his people. And the question I would ask any American is, what do you get from supporting terrorists in our country, in our region? What did you get from supporting the Muslim Brotherhood a few years ago in Egypt and other countries? What did you get from supporting someone like Erdogan? One of the officials from your country asked me seven years ago in Syria at the end of a meeting, "How do you think we can solve the problem in Afghanistan?" I told him, "You have to be able to deal with officials who are not puppets, who can tell you no." So for the United States, only looking for puppet officials and client states is not how you can serve the interests of your country. You are the greatest power in the world now; you have too many things to disseminate around the world: knowledge, innovation, IT, with its positive repercussions. How can you be the best in these fields yet the worst in the political field? This is a contradiction. That is what I think the American people should analyze and question. Why do you

fail in every war? You can create war, you can create problems, but you cannot solve any problem. Twenty years of the peace process in Palestine and Israel, and you cannot do anything with this, in spite of the fact that you are a great country.

But in the context of Syria, what would a better policy look like?

One that preserves stability in the Middle East. Syria is the heart of the Middle East. Everybody knows that. If the Middle East is sick, the whole world will be unstable. In 1991, when we started the peace process, we had a lot of hope. Now, after more than 20 years, things are not at square one; they're much below that square. So the policy should be to help peace in the region, to fight terrorism, to promote secularism, to support this area economically, to help upgrade the mind and society, like you did in your country. That is the supposed mission of the United States, not to launch wars. Launching war doesn't make you a great power.

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12. Syria rebels overtake strategic base in south

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Suleiman Al-Khalidi

AMMAN -- Syrian insurgents, including fighters from al Qaeda's Nusra Front, seized an important government army base in the southwestern Deraa province on Sunday, fighters who took part in the battle said.

The base, one of several used to pound rebel-held villages and towns in southern Syria and along the frontier with Jordan, lies at the heart of a heavily fortified zone which has formed a southern line of defence protecting the capital, Damascus.

The fighters said hundreds of insurgents armed with rocket launchers and anti-aircraft weapons had taken over the Brigade 82 base near the town of Sheikh Maskeen, close to the main north-south highway between Damascus and Jordan.

"This advance will help us cut supply routes of the regime forces in the south from their supplies in the north to be able to eventually take over Deraa city," Colonel Saber Safar, a leader of the First Army, a major faction of Western-backed rebels in the "Southern Front" grouping, told Reuters by phone.

The rebel gain is the latest advance in the south, where President Bashar al-Assad's forces have been on the defensive, losing control of large areas of countryside as well as parts of the border along with Israel near the Golan Heights, according to regional military experts and diplomats.

Fighters said the capture of the base had helped them to overrun most of the nearby town of Sheikh Maskeen, which they have attacked several times in last few months, but failed to seize.

The town is one of the main army supply routes to the city of Deraa, along the border with Jordan that was mainly in government hands.

The south is the last major stronghold of the mainstream, anti-Assad opposition, who have been weakened elsewhere by the expansion of the ultra-hardline Islamic State group in the east and north, and gains by the Nusra Front in the northwest.

However, Nusra is fighting in the south alongside the Western-backed groups, who have proved more united there than in other parts of Syria.

In a separate development on Sunday, Islamist fighters struck the Syrian capital with at least 38 rockets, killing seven people, a monitoring group said, in one of heaviest attacks on Damascus in over a year.

The Saudi-backed Islam Army had warned earlier that it would hit back against an air strike last week in the eastern Ghouta region near Damascus, in which more than 40 people were killed.

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13. Harsh rule of Islamic State

City life is unraveling in Mosul, where Iraqis are feeling the strain of the militants' laws

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A1 | Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Nabih Bulos

Seven months into the takeover of Iraq's second-largest city by Islamist extremists, electricity, rice, flour and medical supplies are dwindling. The water is mucky. Religious minorities are confined to prison camps, and the overwhelmingly Muslim population of Mosul is subject to strict and increasingly arbitrary religious rules.

Those who disobey Islamic State's fundamentalist edicts -- including banning smoking or doing business during daily prayer times, and requiring women to cover their heads and faces -- are whipped. Or worse. Late last month, two doctors were executed, according to ousted officials who continue to communicate by phone with Mosul residents, for having failed to save the life of an Islamic State leader wounded in an airstrike.

"The people of Mosul, a lot of them were educated overseas and they're facing this primitive mentality," said Atheel Najafi, governor of surrounding Nineveh province and scion of an old Mosul family, who was forced to flee when the city fell to the Sunni militants in the summer.

"In many ways, this is a clash of civilizations," he said. "Day by day it gets worse. People are becoming more and more backward."

Such is life in Mosul, a city of more than a million occupied since June by Islamic State, according to escapees and residents interviewed in person and by phone in recent weeks. Although their reports cannot be independently verified -- travel to Mosul is nearly impossible for outsiders -- they are beginning to provide a picture of a city that has undergone a startling transformation.

The militants have blocked roads and blown up bridges into the northern Iraqi city, which they proclaim as one of the capitals of their self-styled Islamic empire, or caliphate, extending west into northern Syria.

Early this month, Islamic State released a video showing British hostage John Cantlie touring Mosul, visiting a market, hospital and police. City services appear to be functioning, the streets full of people and cars.

A Kurdish peshmerga commander in a bunker atop the mountain here overlooking Mosul said the news from the city was discouraging.

"They have police, they have law, they have a government; it's a full-on regime. They're even trying to introduce a currency," said Maj. Haji Abu Hussein, 47, who keeps in touch by cellphone with a Sunni feed salesman in the city.

Other witnesses say the reality of life in Mosul is far more grim: basic services scarce and prices soaring even as the quality of fuel and water deteriorates.

Hospitals, schools and other government offices remain open in part because the Iraqi government continues to pay salaries to tens of thousands of civil servants, a policy opposed by some Kurdish officials, who say it serves to prop up the extremist occupiers.

Reached in Mosul by phone this month, Abu Hussein, 35, a day laborer and father of four, said that contrary to the Cantlie video, government workers were serving Islamic State, not the public.

"Entire hospitals have been commandeered for the fighters," he said. "I tried to take my son because he was sick to the hospital, but they said, 'Get out of here! This is for fighters!' and they gave me 20 lashes of the whip."

Mosul's hospitals face severe shortages of medical supplies, equipment and staff, particularly female nurses and specialists such as surgeons and anesthesiologists, who have fled, according to reports from staffers at the International Organization for Migration.

Militants have instructed pregnant women that it is haram, or unholy, to give birth at a hospital, so they have had to use midwives at home, Abu Hussein said.

Residents have had electricity only for up to two hours every three days, he said. Cellphone reception in the city center was nonexistent in early January, according to the migration group's employees.

Gas fuel canisters went up from \$8 to \$90 under Islamic State, Abu Hussein said. He and others heat their ovens with firewood. Islamic State militants in search of fuel chopped down part of the landmark Al Ghabat forest on the banks of the Tigris River.

Water flows from the tap once a week, and only for a few hours, he said. Other residents told officials outside the city that chlorine shortages contributed to the poor water quality. Some have started to dig wells, the migration group said.

"We use the river water for washing, but it's very dirty. Children in the southern part of Mosul are getting very sick from it," Abu Hussein said.

Abu Hussein doesn't send his children to school because militants have been teaching religious extremism and recruiting young students as fighters. Civics and sports have been banned, and by law teachers are allowed to instruct only students of the same sex.

Those caught smoking, using a cellphone or doing business during five daily prayer times are punished in Islamic courts by untrained judges, usually with fines and whippings.

Islamic State court documents show a man with a cellphone was sentenced in November by a former construction worker-turned-judge to a whipping and fined \$10,000.

Those caught doing business during prayers are lashed 50 times and forced to close for a month; the second time, they are lashed 80 times, their business burned. The punishment for smoking: 40 whips the first time, 100 whips the second time.

Abu Hussein said militants forced a woman from her home and whipped her 40 times because she wasn't wearing the required veil.

But there are signs the militants' grip on the city is slipping. Recent militant convoys from Mosul have been smaller and less frequent, their weaponry less sophisticated.

Najafi, the governor who fled, remains in contact with workers by phone and the Internet from a guarded compound in nearby Dahuk. He said that residents complain about the lack of fuel and basic services, but that their biggest problem is what he calls the "psychological burden" of living under Islamic State, whose local fighters are primarily less educated young men from the countryside.

There are fewer foreign militants in town, and local ones are beset by infighting, he said, forced to draft boys to fill their ranks, some as young as 12. The streets are patrolled mostly by local Islamic police.

Najafi said he pays 60,000 to 70,000 civil servants a total of about \$10 million a month. "We encourage them to work for the necessary services: health, water supply, education," he said, and to report back on conditions in the city.

He said the money is paid directly to the workers through a hawala system of informal money brokers as well as mobile banking. The salaries are an important hearts-and-minds tactic, he said. "If we stop the salaries, we will lose all of our employees. They will follow ISIS," Najafi said, using an acronym for Islamic State.

Cutting off salaries would also deprive residents the few basic services they still have, he said, contending that women and children in particular would suffer if hospitals and schools were forced to close.

"We would face a total crisis inside the city," the governor said. "We are keeping people alive."

If workers are found to have collaborated with Islamic State -- for instance, if an instructor agrees to teach religious extremism -- officials withhold a portion of their salary, he said.

Thus far, salaries have been terminated for only a few Islamic State collaborators, his staff said, including eight municipal workers, one of whom became Mosul's new minister of public works.

Some Kurdish officials believe all salary payments should be halted, noting that civil servants in nearby Kurdistan have not been paid by the central government for a year because of a dispute over oil revenue sharing.

"It's a puzzling policy that they are paying terrorists, but not the ones fighting them," said an official in the Kurdish security chancellor's office who asked not to be named.

He said Kurdish officials have sought to have Baghdad stop the Mosul payments, questioning how Najafi and others can be sure that those who are being paid are not Islamic State supporters.

"We are not for cutting people's livelihoods, but the person paying out the salaries must know if they are supporting ISIS," he said.

The official said cutting Mosul salaries probably would have the opposite effect of what Najafi fears.

"It will make the people feel very disenfranchised. They will turn to ISIS for that money and they won't have it and the people will have no choice but to rise up," he said.

Najafi said Mosul residents post updates almost daily on a Facebook page called "The Mosul Brigades," including details about how they have shot and killed Islamic State fighters in stealth attacks.

An additional 11,000 resistance fighters have begun training outside the city with U.S. and Canadian advisors at two sites under the command of a retired Iraqi general, Najafi said. Many of the volunteers are former Mosul police who fought Islamic State in the summer and know the terrain and the people.

"If we want them to rise up," Najafi said of Mosul residents, "we need to communicate with them, give them some weapons and support."

--Bulos is a special correspondent

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14. Iraq 'sleeper cells' fight Islamic State group

Associated Press, Jan. 26 | Sameer N. Yacoub

BAGHDAD — "Sleeper cells" made up of former Iraqi police officers and soldiers are tipping off authorities to Islamic State group positions in the northern city of Mosul, a prominent lawmaker has told The Associated Press.

The comments by Hakim al-Zamili, the head of parliament's security and defense committee, are the first high-level confirmation of the groups' existence after weeks of rumors.

Their work remains incredibly dangerous as the Islamic State group has shut down mobile phone networks and regularly kills suspected government collaborators. However, their intelligence could prove invaluable as the U.S.-led coalition steps up airstrikes around Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, to disrupt Islamic State group supply lines ahead of an expected operation later this year to take back the city from militants

"Those patriotic groups, some operate from inside the city of Mosul and others from the areas surrounding it, are now giving us information about the military preparations being made by Islamic State group in order to face any attack by government forces to retake the city," al-Zamili told the AP.

The Islamic State group captured Mosul in August during its blitz across northern Iraq. The militants now hold about a third of both Iraq and neighboring Syria in its self-declared caliphate.

Many soldiers and police officers dropped their weapons and fled during the extremists' initial offensive. Now, however, some have begun spying on behalf of the Iraqi government, al-Zamili said. Resentment among Mosul residents over all has grown as prices of most food staples have more than doubled, kerosene is in short supply and militants have banned alcohol and cigarettes.

In late November, the Islamic State group blocked all mobile phone networks in Mosul, accusing informants in the city of tipping off coalition and Iraqi forces to their whereabouts. The move caused chaos across Mosul.

Typically, informants leave Mosul and head to higher altitudes to get a network signal so they can make calls, al-Zamili said. Their information then gets passed to Iraqi security commanders in charge of airstrikes and military operation in Nineveh province, the lawmaker said. So far, the information has not been shared with U.S.-led forces, he said.

"We receive a lot of useful information from Mosulis who are becoming fed-up with the militants and this is the reason why the IS group blocked all mobile phone networks in the city," he said.

In recent days, coalition airstrikes pounded at least two dozen locations around Mosul, destroying dozens of vehicles, buildings, fighting positions and insurgent units. The airstrikes, said one senior military official, are the start of a new phase, and military leaders are watching to see how the militants respond. The official was not authorized to discuss the operations publicly so spoke on condition of anonymity.

Any offensive to retake Mosul likely remains months away. However, al-Zamili said the intelligence helps. To encourage others, he said Iraq's parliament is considering laws to reinstate soldiers and police officers who served under former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein but have taken the "honorable stance" in cooperating with Iraqi authorities battling the Islamic State group.

--Associated Press writer Lolita C. Baldor in Washington contributed to this report

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ASIA/PACIFIC

15. Forty-nine Philippine police killed after clash with rebels

Agence France-Presse, Jan. 26 | Joel Guinto

Forty-nine Philippine police commandos were killed when they clashed with Muslim rebels in the south, police said Monday, a bloodbath which tested a peace accord signed last March.

An 11-hour gunbattle broke out after police entered the remote town of Mamasapano, held by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), around 3:00 am Sunday (1900 GMT Saturday) without coordinating with the rebels as required under their ceasefire agreement.

The bodies of 49 police have been recovered from the town on Mindanao island and moved to an army camp, regional police spokeswoman Judith Ambong told AFP.

She did not say whether any MILF members were killed.

Police had been targeting two high-profile terror suspects in the operation.

"This is going to be a big problem," the MILF's chief peace negotiator Mohagher Iqbal told AFP when asked how the fighting would affect the peace process.

But he and government officials said the ceasefire still held.

Philippine national police chief Leonardo Espina and interior and local government secretary Manuel Roxas flew to Maguindanao on Mindanao island on Monday.

In a statement Espina said the police commandos were chasing a "high-value target" believed to be behind recent bomb attacks in the south. He did not elaborate.

Iqbal said they were trying to arrest a member of regional terror group Jemaah Islamiyah called Zulkifli bin Hir alias Marwan, among the United States' most wanted with a \$5 million bounty for his capture.

Malaysian bomb-maker Zulkifli is the most prominent of the 10 to 12 foreign JI members believed hiding in the Philippines. He went into hiding in the southern region in 2003 and has since been training local militants, according to the military.

Authorities were also allegedly targeting Basit Usman, commander of the BIFF Philippine Muslim rebel faction that is not part of peace talks.

Ceasefire monitors are investigating the incident, Iqbal said.

The 10,000-member MILF had agreed to end decades of rebellion in the mainly Catholic nation in exchange for a proposed law now being debated in parliament that would give minority Muslims self-rule in several southern provinces.

The rebels were scheduled to start disarming at the start of this year under the peace treaty.

"This is the first encounter between the MILF and (government forces) this year. Hopefully, this will be the last," Iqbal said.

"We are committed (to the peace process). For the MILF, the ceasefire still holds," he said.

The rebel group's vice chairman, Ghazali Jaafar, said the peace treaty signed last March was the only solution to the conflict.

"It is not logical for anybody to delay the process," he told reporters by phone.

Sunday's bloodbath highlighted "security challenges" but nonetheless strengthened the resolve of negotiators, government peace panel chairperson Miriam Coronel-Ferrer said in a statement.

Over 1,000 people displaced by the violence have begun returning to their homes after the fighting stopped Sunday afternoon, Mayor Tahirodin Bazar Ampatuan said.

The firefight in Mamasapano was only the second since the ceasefire. Two soldiers and 18 Muslim gunmen were killed in a clash on the southern island of Basilan in April 2014.

The Muslim rebellion in Mindanao had claimed tens of thousands of lives over several decades.

Since the peace deal was struck, troops and police have been pursuing the BIFF, a group of several hundred Muslim gunmen who reject the peace treaty.

Last year the BIFF pledged allegiance to Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria.

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16. Two Japanese Hostages, as Different as Can Be, Linked by Fate in Syria

New York Times, Jan. 26, Pg. A9 | Martin Fackler

TOKYO -- In the public's mind, the two Japanese hostages held by Islamic State militants have become inextricably linked: a pair of grim-faced figures who appeared last week in a video kneeling in orange jumpsuits next to a masked militant demanding a ransom for their lives.

The fates of the two men became even more tightly bound over the weekend, when an image was released showing one holding what appeared to be a photograph of the other's decapitated body, and the Islamic State announced on its Al Bayan radio station that it had killed one of the men. An Islamic State-affiliated radio station confirmed late Sunday that one of the hostages had been murdered.

Yet the paths that led the two men to their joint captivity in Syria could not have been more different.

The surviving hostage, Kenji Goto, 47, is a respected journalist who knew his way around conflict zones after having spent more than two decades covering them as a freelance television cameraman and the author of five books. He appeared initially drawn to Syria and Iraq by a lifelong idealistic zeal to cover the plight of the weak, and particularly refugee children.

The other man, Haruna Yukawa, 42, was a lost soul who had attempted suicide in 2008 and seemed to become unhinged by a string of setbacks in life, including bankruptcy and the death of his wife. Convinced that he was the reincarnation of a celebrated World War II-era female spy, he wandered into Syria in search of a fresh start in life. On his blog, he fantasized about gaining enough combat experience against the Taliban and Al Qaeda to one day work as a security adviser for Japanese companies in dangerous areas.

Instead, he quickly got in over his head. Another Syrian rebel group briefly detained him before he was captured in August by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

Almost improbably, the two Japanese men had crossed paths even before appearing together in last week's ransom video. Indeed, the picture that emerges from accounts on the two men's blogs, and from friends and family of both men, is that the more experienced journalist appeared to take the luckless and perhaps misguided Mr. Yukawa under his wing and felt responsible for him.

After the militants captured Mr. Yukawa, Mr. Goto tried to win his freedom by making a highly risky trip into territory controlled by the Islamic State, which has conquered large parts of Syria and Iraq. Mr. Goto was apparently captured during that ill-fated rescue mission in late October. "He went flying over there to do whatever he could, to help and to save an acquaintance who had been detained first," Mr. Goto's mother, Junko Ishido, 78,

said Friday, referring to Mr. Yukawa. She explained her son's actions by saying he had always tried to help the weak.

"Even before he could walk right, he would always, always treat those kinds of younger children with kindness," she said. "He is a kind child, but also a child who burns with a sense of justice."

In what appears to have been his last video before heading into an area of Syria controlled by the militants, Mr. Goto seems to stoically accept the risks. Looking directly into the camera, he says that no matter what happens, he does not want anyone to blame the people of Syria.

"It is a pretty dangerous trip," Mr. Goto says, speaking first in his native Japanese and then in English. "If something happens, all responsibility is on me."

Mr. Goto's calm resolve and strong sense of purpose are consistent with the details of him that emerge on the website of his tiny news agency, Independent Press. The agency that he started 19 years ago, and which sells news stories to television programs, says its mission is to cover "conflicts, refugees, poverty, AIDS and children." In an interview last year on a religious website, he said he had converted to Christianity -- uncommon in predominantly Buddhist Japan -- because he was afraid of dying alone in a distant war zone.

Little is known of key aspects of his personal life. In public, he was strongly antiwar, speaking passionately about the plight of children in conflicts. His judgment and experience won the respect of some of the nation's top journalists. "He is a veteran war journalist who can make split-second decisions about what is dangerous or not," Akira Ikegami, a retired newscaster who is now a popular commentator, said in a newspaper interview last week. "I completely trust him."

The two men first met in April after Mr. Yukawa was detained by the Free Syrian Army, a relatively moderate rebel group, during his first trip into Syria. Mr. Goto negotiated Mr. Yukawa's release, earning Mr. Yukawa's gratitude. Three months later, just before his capture, Mr. Yukawa spent a week working as Mr. Goto's assistant in Iraq, where the veteran journalist gave him survival tips.

"My instinct tells me we will be lifelong friends," Mr. Yukawa wrote in his blog. "It could only be fate that we met in Syria."

But much of his blog contains convoluted and sometimes bizarre soul-searching. The oddest passages were his description of his attempted suicide in 2008, when he castrated himself as a way to bleed to death. Quick action by his wife and doctors saved his life; he later wrote that, bereft of male hormones, he would live as a woman.

He changed his given name to the feminine Haruna and became convinced that he was the reincarnation of Yoshiko Kawashima, a Manchu princess who became a spy for Imperial Japan and was known for wearing men's clothes. Mr. Yukawa's life took another big turn after the death of his wife from lung cancer. Early last year, he set off for the Middle East, telling friends and relatives that this was his last chance for finding success.

"The experiences I gain on this voyage will change my life," he wrote in his blog in April. "I will come back if the world decides it needs me."

Once in Syria, he posted videos of himself firing AK-47 assault rifles, and befriended a Japanese-Korean member of the Free Syrian Army. He was with the rebels when their position was overrun by Islamic State fighters, who posted a video of a captured Mr. Yukawa, bleeding from the face as he is interrogated.

During the two-minute video, the fighters repeatedly ask Mr. Yukawa one question that he seemed incapable of answering: Why are you here?

That same question has been posed by Japanese news media, which have been less sympathetic to Mr. Yukawa than to Mr. Goto. After the image of the decapitated body of Mr. Yukawa appeared, his father, Shoichi, 74, appeared in public to apologize for his son, saying he had caused trouble for both Japan and Mr. Goto.

"My son said he is a sincere and kind person," Mr. Yukawa's father, said Sunday, referring to Mr. Goto. "He worried about my son and risked his life by going into the war zone. That pains me. I wish for his quick release and safe return."

--Makiko Inoue and Hisako Ueno contributed reporting

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AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

17. Afghan air force ascent slow, imperiling battle with Taliban

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Kay Johnson

KABUL -- Afghanistan's armed forces are so short of combat-ready aircraft that, late last year, they began fitting machine guns and rockets to Russian-made Mi-17 transport helicopters, dubbed "flying tractors", to bolster their air power.

With new planes capable of engaging Taliban insurgents delayed by over two years, and NATO air missions backing up troops on the ground now at a minimum, the fledgling Afghan Air Force is scrambling to provide even basic support.

That is a worry for 350,000 police, soldiers and other security personnel fighting militants across the country and dying at a rate of around 100 every week in the heaviest fighting of a 13-year conflict.

Without air support they say they will struggle to defeat the enemy, especially now that tens of thousands of foreign troops supporting them have ended their mission.

NATO is training and advising some 390 Afghan pilots, most with no tactical combat experience, and a limited number of planes and helicopters have been promised to bolster an air force of around 140 aircraft, mostly transport helicopters.

As a stopgap measure, the Afghans began fitting forward-firing 23mm machine guns and 57mm rockets to some of the 86 Mi-17 transport helicopters to supplement five larger Mi-35 attack helicopters that were the only combat aircraft.

"That's not enough to support all the missions," Col. Abdul Shafi Noori, the air force's maintenance group commander, said of the expanded combat fleet, which should number about 30.

"READY THE ROCKETS"

Nevertheless, it is a start, and, at the air force training base just outside the capital Kabul, Afghan pilots have been putting adapted Mi-17s through their paces.

Flying fast and low over barren hills, a helicopter crew zooms its sights on the target: a group of trucks parked on a ridge, representing vehicles full of Taliban insurgents.

"You see the threat?" the American trainer asks the pilot. "Target at 4 o'clock. Ready the rockets."

The crew fires off machine guns and a 57mm rocket that shudders the helicopter as it's released, before obliterating one of the trucks.

This month, a newly modified Mi-17 came to the rescue in real combat, helping an Afghan patrol pinned down by insurgents firing from a ridge in Badakhshan province in the northeast.

The air force plans to have about a dozen weaponized Mi-17s by the spring fighting season that typically begins in April.

"Wherever they are going to be able to get into the fight, it's going to make a big difference," said U.S. Brigadier General Michael Rothstein, commander of the NATO air force training mission.

By June, the air force will also have a dozen more MD-530 helicopters - smaller, swifter machines modified with armor and .50 caliber machine guns, with the first six arriving next month.

Rothstein acknowledged that it was "hard to predict" exactly how effective the air force would be in the coming year, "...but I think they are going to be able to make an impact."

TROUBLED LIFT-OFF

The air force, all but wiped out by civil war and the U.S.-led campaign to topple the Taliban, has only a fraction of NATO's former air power.

At the height of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan in 2011, the coalition flew nearly 133,000 flight missions that year, about 34,000 of those for close air support.

Last year, the Afghan Air Force flew an estimated 7,000 missions, a small fraction in direct support of troops on the ground.

The seven-year-old project to build up the air force has been fraught with setbacks and delays.

An Afghan Air Force pilot gunned down nine Americans at Kabul airport in 2011. The next year, the United States opened an investigation into allegations that some pilots were transporting narcotics on undocumented flights.

Last year, most of the 20 Italian-made G222 transport planes the U.S. bought for \$486 million were sold for scrap metal after being grounded because Afghans could not maintain them, said the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

And Afghans are still waiting for 20 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft capable of dropping 500-pound bombs.

Originally scheduled to arrive in mid-2012, delivery has been held up by a legal dispute and is now expected around December, too late for this year's peak fighting season.

Even when Air Force capabilities are expanded, the NATO training mission must teach pilots not only how to fly new aircraft, but also use them tactically.

Largely untested younger pilots will have to learn quickly how to coordinate with ground troops, fly in formation, discern enemy fighters from Afghan forces and avoid killing civilians.

"It takes a long time for them to learn the Western style of fighting and being organized," said Glenn Sands, editor of *Air Forces Monthly*.

Beyond engaging the enemy, the air force's job is also to save lives. Many of about 5,000 Afghan security personnel killed last year died because they did not reach medical care fast enough.

For Afghan pilot Azizulla Mohammadi, 26, a first lieutenant who ferries supplies and helps evacuate wounded in a C-130 transport plane, the job involves both pride and frustration.

"We can't support all of Afghanistan with this few aircraft," he said. "I feel bad we can't help more."

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UKRAINE/RUSSIA

18. West looks for ways to pressure Moscow

U.S. and E.U. decry deadly rocket attack in eastern Ukraine

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A8 | Karoun Demirjian

Moscow - Western leaders are weighing what new pressure they can put on Moscow to rein in pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, after a rocket attack on the port city of Mariupol left dozens of civilians dead.

President Obama said Sunday that he was "deeply concerned" about the latest round of hostilities, during which Grad rockets that international monitors claimed were fired from rebel-held territory hit homes, stores and a school in Mariupol, killing 30 and wounding more than 100 Saturday. Obama promised the United States would "continue to ratchet up the pressure" on Russia in response, considering every option short of military engagement.

European Council President Donald Tusk cautioned on Twitter against "appeasement" of Russia and called on Europe to "step up our policy," while the European Union's top diplomat, Federica Mogherini, called for an "extraordinary" session Thursday to discuss reactions to the Mariupol attack.

The United States and the European Union have imposed several rounds of sanctions against Russia over its role in the Ukraine conflict, while promising that the punishing measures could be walked back if Russia supports implementation of a peace agreement struck in Minsk, Belarus, in September. The sanctions have increased Russia's diplomatic and financial isolation at a time when falling oil prices are sending shocks through the country's economy.

But thus far the measures do not appear to have persuaded President Vladimir Putin to change his policy.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry on Sunday that Russia was "ready to do everything in its power" to push the Ukrainian conflict toward a peaceful solution, according to a Foreign Ministry statement. But Lavrov also blamed Kiev for the surge in violence, repeating a line that has almost become a refrain: If Kiev wants to solve the conflict, it should engage in direct dialogue with the rebels and accept Putin's latest peace proposal - which the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, last week dismissed as "a Russian occupation plan."

Separatist leaders in Donetsk called the attack on Mariupol a "provocation" by Kiev. But the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported there were clear signs the rockets were fired from areas controlled by the separatists.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko reiterated Ukraine's support for the Minsk agreement Sunday and urged new talks. But Donetsk rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko said Friday that the separatists no longer recognized the Minsk cease-fire and would initiate no further peace talks, focusing instead on pushing their offensive to the borders of the Donetsk region.

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19. Will Russia's Sub-Building Boom Matter?

Defense News, Jan. 26, Pg. 1 | Christopher P. Cavas

WASHINGTON — The Russian Navy's submarine force is on a roll.

Four different kinds of submarines are under construction and more are coming. The country expects to lay down five new nuclear submarines in 2015.

The Navy is accepting Borey-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, Yasen-class nuclear attack submarines, and Kilo- and Lada-class diesel electric attack submarines. Six Kilos are being built for Vietnam and more are offered for export.

This rate of construction is beginning to look more like Cold War days rather than the lethargic shipbuilding rates prevalent since the 1990s.

By comparison, the US only recently returned to building two nuclear attack submarines per year, and industry is gearing up to begin construction of a new class of ballistic submarines in 2021 — a three-subs-per-year construction rate not seen since the Reagan era.

Combine the revived Russian submarine construction rate with President Vladimir Putin's aggressive stances of the past year, along with the steady drumbeat of Chinese naval expansion, and the question might be asked — is a submarine race going on?

"I know a lot of folks like the term arms race, but I think it's more complicated than that," said Thomas Mahnken, a former US defense official and now a professor at the Naval War College. "There's definitely competition going on — with the US, other NATO navies, China — but there's also modernization going on. An increasing portion of what Russia is doing is replacing aging systems or systems that already have been retired."

"I would be skeptical," cautioned Norman Friedman, a longtime naval analyst and author. "There's a history in that country of laying down things that don't get finished for a long time. No question they'll lay down the subs, but actually building them after that is a more interesting question."

The Russians frequently issue proclamations that they intend to increase naval construction, including statements about building a fleet of aircraft carriers. But ship construction remains modest, and the Navy remains largely a collection of Cold War relics. Yet Russia has a long tradition of building tough and innovative submarines.

"The Russians have put their money where their mouth is with regard to submarine construction and development," said Bryan Clark, a former US Navy submariner and strategist, now an analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. "They see that as a way to generate an asymmetric advantage over US forces. If they can develop a really high-end submarine force like they did in the Cold War, it would create a problem for US naval planners and strategists thinking through how to deal with a potential Russian threat — one that could emerge without a lot of warning."

Construction Delays

The most lethal new subs are those of the Yuri Dolgoruky class, also known as the Project 955 Borey class. Construction of the Dolgoruky has been a protracted affair — the ship was laid down at the Sevmash military shipyard in Severodvinsk in 1996 but not launched until 2007. Sea trials began in 2009, but development of the ship's primary weapon, the Bulava intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), itself has been fraught with problems. It was only in 2014 that the submarine submerged with a full load of 16 ICBMs, according to Russian media.

A second Borey, the Alexander Nevsky, was laid down in March 2004 and began sea trials in 2011. Like the Dolgoruky, the ship and its missiles have experienced numerous problems, and trials continued at least through 2013. Vladimir Monomakh, the third Borey, was commissioned last December after eight years of construction and trials.

Three more Boreys are under construction, and Russian Navy chief Adm. Viktor Chirkov said in December two more would be laid down in 2015, for a total of eight, all expected to be in service by 2020.

The design of the Dolgorukys uses many features of earlier submarines. In fact, the first units used pieces and components built for earlier submarines that were either scrapped or never finished. Russian media reports indicate the Vladimir Monomakh used significant hull components of the decommissioned Akula-class attack submarine Ak Bars.

"I get the feeling for all the big talk from the Russians about building a new fleet, they're probably having trouble getting stuff," Friedman said. "For the first subs, they used pieces from earlier subs."

The Dolgoruky carried out an operational test firing of a Bulava in October, the Itar-Tass news agency reported — the third successful test launch since a September 2013 failure — and two more will take place in 2015.

Meanwhile, construction of Yasen-class Project 885M nuclear attack submarines is picking up. The first unit, Severodvinsk, was commissioned at the end of 2013 after a 20-year construction period, during which the submarine underwent significant re-design. A second unit, laid down in 2009 at Sevmash, could be delivered this year.

Two more Yasens were laid down in 2014. Itar-Tass reported on Dec. 26 that Mikhail Budnichenko, head of Sevmash, said three Project 885 Yasen-class subs would be laid down this year along with two Boreys.

Non-nuclear submarine construction also continues. Along with several Kilo-class subs being built for the Russian Navy and export, at least one more Lada-class diesel-electric submarine is to begin construction this year.

Numbers vs. Effectiveness

But can Russia sustain this prodigious submarine construction effort?

"The naval production we're likely to see this year is an artifact of decisions made some time ago when oil prices were fairly high and before a number of Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia," Mahnken said. "Whatever the Russians do this year, I think it'll be very hard for them to sustain naval production going forward."

Added Friedman: "Putin doesn't have that much money. And with the drop in oil prices, they have very bad problems."

With the post-1990 decline in shipbuilding, Friedman said, the shipyards have lost much of their submarine-building expertise.

"A lot of people quit the yards" when construction all but ended, he said. "If they lost a lot of their smarter people, there's a difficulty in recreating what they had. Coming back 15 years later and trying to recreate it is kind of dubious."

Clark agreed.

"Their industrial base is weakened from two decades of not being used," he said. "You've got a significant reduction in the number of skilled engineers, the aging out of people who otherwise would be part of the Russian design base."

"While Russian engineering and technology development is top-notch, they don't necessarily have the people to be able to do all the legwork necessary to take an idea into a reality. That's why you see things like submarines taking 10 or more years to construct, because they just don't have the design and construction base to support high-rate production."

But are the new submarines cause for worry?

The Yasen attack subs "are probably what you could get in 1989, plus improved combat systems," Friedman said. "They got access to microprocessors and things like that. But they're not going to the insertion of new technology, because they're not that flexible. But I would guess the combat systems have improved substantially."

Clark sees no cause for alarm in the pace of Russian submarine construction.

"They don't have very many submarines today, and they certainly don't have very many frontline submarines that would be anywhere close to US submarines," he said. "The best submarines the Russians are producing are perhaps equivalent to some of the older US submarines currently in use. It would take a while for the Russians to build up enough of those to where they create a potential problem for the US."

"The main concern," Clark added, "is that even a small number of very good submarines can be problematic from an intelligence-gathering and surprise strike kind of perspective. But they're not able to cause a debilitating effect to a fleet."

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EUROPE

20. Germany stops arms exports to Saudi Arabia – media report

Reuters, Jan. 25 | Michelle Martin and Thomas Seythal

BERLIN -- Germany has decided to stop exporting arms to Saudi Arabia, the German newspaper Bild am Sonntag said on Sunday, citing government sources as saying the kingdom was "too unstable" for it to be receiving deliveries of weapons.

The newspaper said Germany's national security council, which holds its meetings in secrecy and is made up of Chancellor Angela Merkel, Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel and seven other ministers, had made the decision on Wednesday.

The German economy ministry declined to comment on the article and said it would publish its report on 2015 arms exports next year. But it added that would only include exports that had been approved, not those which had been declined.

The council members all declined to approve arms export to Saudi Arabia or deferred their decision until further notice, Bild am Sonntag said.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah died on Friday and his successor, King Salman, takes charge at a time of uncertainty in the kingdom. The Middle East is in tumult and the Saudis are nervous about both Iranian influence and the spread of Islamist militants.

In October, a document showed Germany's national security council approved the export of arms to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other countries in the Middle East. Arms approved for Saudi Arabia included six weapons systems for testing and electronic surveillance equipment.

In contrast, two-thirds of proposed arms export licenses were declined May 2014, according to media reports, including to Arab states.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Germany was the world's third-largest arms exporter from 2008-2012, behind the United States and Russia.

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DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

21. Chuck Hagel exiting on his own terms

Politico.com, Jan. 25 | Philip Ewing

Chuck Hagel is going out like he came in: on his own.

When the White House invited him to the ceremony in which President Barack Obama nominated his successor, he didn't go. As members of Congress schedule their hearings about the Pentagon's new budget, they're getting his successor, not him. And even though the military plans a big, formal farewell for Hagel on Wednesday, he expects to stay on the job for several more weeks — with an even lower profile.

Hagel has been at arm's length from the White House since his name first leaked as Obama's choice to replace Leon Panetta well ahead of his formal nomination — keeping him from responding to a concerted opposition campaign.

He made matters worse with a botched Senate confirmation hearing that members called one of the worst they'd ever seen. And he tangled behind the scenes inside the administration right up until Obama pushed him out late last year.

Even so, after it all, Hagel isn't glum — he's upbeat.

He continues to meet with foreign delegations and top commanders, including the general who's running the administration's effort to begin training and equipping the "moderate" Syrian opposition. On a trip across the country to thank troops in all four military branches, Hagel vowed to work until "the last hour," and repeated to each audience that he was proud of his time in the Pentagon.

"I've had a very fortunate life," he told Marines outside San Diego. Later, at the Pentagon, he told reporters how pleased he was to be associated with the finest fighting force in the world.

"All of America, I know, is very proud of the men and women of this institution."

For critics, however, Hagel's trip to Missouri, California, Texas and New Mexico was a visual joke about his distance from the president and the White House national security team — a guy out wandering the Earth while the Pentagon and Washington continued buzzing without him.

"I think he's going to be remembered as a big yawn for his time as SecDef," said Steven Bucci, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense who's now a top defense national security scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Defense officials wanted Hagel's visit to Fort Bliss, Texas, where he finished basic training in 1967, to illustrate the scale of his journey from dirt-poor Nebraska kid to senator to secretary of defense. But just because he's the first former enlisted soldier to lead the Defense Department does not itself mean he was very good at the job, Bucci said.

"God bless him — he served in the military and was wounded. But a heckuva lot of people served in the military in that era, a couple hundred thousand," Bucci said. "The vast majority of us are probably not the right guys to be secretary of defense."

Hagel's passive approach, his lack of government executive experience and, Bucci said, the almost impossible relationship with the White House meant a lot of "muddling along" and not much of an imprint on the Pentagon.

Hagel's camp rejects that notion. It argues there's no question the former Republican senator's "steady leadership" and "sweeping reforms" leave the Defense Department in better shape than he found it. And Hagel himself knows he's been the subject of a lot of Beltway tittering. But as one senior defense official put it after Hagel announced his resignation, he remains "sanguine."

At no time on his three-day "farewell" swing did Hagel allude to the disputes with the White House that led to his ouster and prompted Obama to nominate Hagel's former deputy, Ash Carter, to replace him. Nor did Hagel appear to be chomping at the bit to get out from under the thumb of a White House that never fully embraced him after he struggled out of the gate at his Senate confirmation hearing.

"What do I do next? I don't know," Hagel mused. "I haven't thought about it. I never have. I probably shouldn't say this, because I do believe in planning ... but I've never thought about my next job. I finish one, and then I think about, well, what could I do next? Or how does that all work? ... I let the currents take me."

Hagel has no major regrets about his stint at the Pentagon.

Troop and veterans' advocates have hailed the special attention he's paid them, including his regular off-the-record lunches to hear straight from junior enlisted service members. He told troops he's pleased with what he accomplished, including reforms of the military's health care system and nuclear forces.

All the same, the Obama gridlock era meant many other major changes that Hagel wanted to make to DOD, or the military, ran into a brick wall.

When he asked to retire the Air Force's A-10 Warthog attack jets, cut troop benefits and close bases in the U.S. — Congress said no. Meanwhile, when he asked the White House for more relief on the defense budget, or for clarity about its strategy on tough issues — it said no.

That sustained tension with the White House was the real source of Hagel's troubles, said a second former senior defense official, who asked not to be identified.

The president wanted someone he could send off to shrink the Pentagon and ignore — right up until world events meant that plan was no longer workable, the official said. When the crises in Syria and Iraq meant Obama needed a wartime consigliere, Hagel wasn't prepared to offer a new outlook. Not only that, by the time the crises were

forcing a reluctant administration to change its tack, Hagel also was no longer prepared to just go along to get along.

He stopped being a “yes-man” on defense budget cuts, one Senate aide told POLITICO. He questioned Obama’s handling of Russia and Syria. He took his time approving the release of some 44 detainees from the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, despite Obama’s desire to ship out as many prisoners as possible as part of a plan to close it.

“I suspect I might not have made everybody happy always on that point,” Hagel acknowledged.

The feeling was mutual.

“When he was appointed, they thought this would be the same guy Obama knew [in the Senate] and just preside over cutting the budget of the department,” the former senior defense official said. “They weren’t prepared for him to actually develop his own points of view or get in their way as he did on Syria, or with certifying Gitmo detainees for release.”

Hagel’s predecessors — Panetta and Robert Gates — both complained about the level of micromanagement from the White House and its National Security Council. Although Hagel has kept mostly quiet about it, by all accounts, that intense level of scrutiny has persisted.

The former official described a Hagel visit to the Senate to brief then-Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) on the “strategic choices and management review.”

Levin loved the brief. He asked Hagel to send a copy of the slides he’d used. Of course, Hagel said. But before he had even made it back to the Pentagon, Hagel’s staff got word from the White House: No, you will not give that PowerPoint deck to Levin.

“There were any number of things like this,” the official said. “He did not have full freedom to manage the department.”

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22. DoD Business Panel Proposes \$125 Billion in Savings

Defense News, Jan. 26, Pg. 7 | Paul McLeary

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon’s Defense Business Board (DBB) issued a series of recommendations on Jan. 22 calling on the Defense Department to slash \$125 billion in spending over the next five years by reducing services from contractors, implementing early retirements, reworking contracts and reducing administrative costs.

The report comes at the direction of Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work, whose October 2014 memo to the civilian panel instructed it to form a Task Group “to review and recommend changes to the Department’s current plans for enterprise modernization.”

Specifically, Work wanted advice on how private sector organizations consolidate their information technology (IT) services and to “recommend ways to best reconfigure all or part of DoD’s supporting business process and their associated IT.”

He also wanted the board to recommend an approach to quantify "the economic value of modernization on a productivity basis," and how modernizing department business practices would help it gain further efficiencies.

The DBB released its findings just a week before the fiscal 2016 defense budget is due to be unveiled.

The task group identified more than 1 million people working in the DoD's human resources, health care, financial, logistics, acquisition and property management fields. It claimed that by renegotiating contracts with vendors, offering early retirements and retraining employees to be more efficient, the building could save about \$125 billion between fiscal 2016 and 2020, or about \$25 billion a year.

Those savings could then be pumped back into the force, the board claims, and would equal the funding it takes to field 50 Army brigades, 10 Navy carrier strike groups or 83 Air Force F-35 fighter wings.

The three biggest cost saving initiatives identified between 2016 and 2020 are \$49 billion to \$89 billion through "more rigorous vendor negotiations" for contracted goods and services; another \$23 billion to \$53 billion through retirement and attrition of defense civilians and contractors, also reducing redundancy; and \$5 billion to \$9 billion in its IT processes through data center consolidation, cloud migration and automating some functions.

Work's Oct. 15 memo said the DoD spends about \$100 billion annually on "core business processes," which he identified as human resources and healthcare management, financial management, logistics and supply, and property management.

"My goal is to modernize our business processes and supporting systems and create an agile enterprise shared services organization in order to reduce costs, maximize return on investment, and improve performance," he wrote.

The study also includes deep looks at the business processes of Lockheed Martin, Pepsi Co., Hewlett Packard, and IBM.

The inclusion of such large commercial firms has raised some eyebrows, however.

"Commercial businesses tolerate risk because the worst that can happen to their business is that they lose some money" said Steven Grundman, Lund Fellow for Emerging Defense Challenges at the Atlantic Council.

"The military organizes and costs for risk because there are far more consequential interests that they are guarding than money, and mitigating risk is expensive and one reason the analog between business and the military is imperfect at best."

The DBB also looked at several Pentagon programs to gain some insight on how procurement practices can be streamlined. They studied the Army Logistics Support Agency's successful outsourcing its data center, the 10-year, \$1 billion failure of the Defense Integrated Military Human Resources System, which was canceled in 2010, and the Air Force's \$1.1 billion Expeditionary Combat Support System failure.

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23. Bottomless Pit at the Pentagon

Estimates of the total costs for the war against terror range as high as \$5 trillion

CQ Weekly, Jan. 26, Pg. 18 | Shawn Zeller

The war on terrorism that began in full after the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 has been phenomenally expensive, but not many people know just how costly.

The Congressional Research Service put a number on it last month, tallying up appropriations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus the costs of military base security, and found that America's longest war has cost the American people \$1.6 trillion through fiscal 2014. Add about \$73.5 billion for fiscal 2015, the appropriations for which were settled after the report came out.

That overall cost is equal to nearly half of the total federal budget for fiscal 2014, which was about \$3.5 trillion.

Because the number is shocking, it's prompted plenty of second-guessing. Interest groups and university professors have examined different ways in which Congress could have spent the money and argued that it would have been wiser to do so. Members of Congress, of course, have questioned the purpose of the war in Iraq, and even some of the expenditures in Afghanistan. Others have drawn attention to waste in government contracting and suggested that Congress needs to treat the war on terrorism like it does other federal programs, by weighing the costs and benefits.

As yet, though, there's been no consensus about whether to actually try to do that, or how to more carefully review the administration's spending requests.

In the meantime, the costs continue. CRS projects that they will gradually decline throughout the decade to about \$15 billion a year, but much remains unknown. President Barack Obama is eager to step up the U.S. attacks on Islamic radicals in Syria and Iraq, for instance, a mission that could prove very expensive.

"We've never fully articulated how we are going to fight this war" on terrorism, says Christopher Shays, a former Republican member of the House from Connecticut who served on Congress' Commission on Wartime Contracting from 2009 to 2011. "We've never determined if the things we are doing are resulting in the outcomes we want."

The CRS's \$1.6 trillion tally makes the war on terrorism America's second-most expensive conflict. World War II cost more than \$4 trillion in today's dollars. But the CRS figure is clearly an underestimate. It doesn't include the vast expense of improving security at government facilities in the United States, of creating a Department of Homeland Security, or of federalizing airport security. Nor does it consider the private sector's costs to bolster security for facilities and intellectual property. Other estimates put the broader cost of fighting terrorism, so far, at between \$3 trillion and \$5 trillion.

In war-fighting, the normal economies of scale don't seem to apply, the CRS report reveals. As the number of soldiers deployed rises, one would expect the cost per soldier to fall. But this has not been the case. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the cost per deployed soldier rose, in Iraq from \$490,000 in fiscal 2005 to \$800,000 in fiscal 2008, and from \$580,000 to \$820,000 over the same period in Afghanistan.

CRS speculates in some detail about the reasons. More soldiers, of course, need more hardware, like armored Humvees, to protect them from harm. They're also drawing better pay and benefits, thanks to Congress' moves in recent years to improve those to help military recruiters convince more people to volunteer. More elaborate bases

are built when more soldiers arrive, which require all sorts of support services, from intelligence to communications. And then, CRS adds, there was also corruption that pervaded wartime contracting practices.

It might also seem logical that costs would fall as troops are pulled out. In fact, they grow exponentially as support services for the remaining soldiers remain in place. CRS reports that in Iraq, per-troop costs doubled from \$800,000 in fiscal 2008 to \$1.6 million in fiscal 2012 when the last U.S. troops left the country. In Afghanistan, per-troop costs fluctuated between \$820,000 and \$910,000 between fiscal 2008 and fiscal 2011, and are expected to hit \$3.9 million per deployed soldier in fiscal 2015 as the U.S. draws down.

It's certain that the costs are not going to go away and will continue to accrue for generations, reducing corporate profits, increasing government borrowing and driving up interest rates for everyone. "We're talking about immense implications," says Winslow Wheeler, director of the Straus Military Reform Project at the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group. "The \$1.6 trillion is just a down payment."

A Ledger of War Costs

CRS's report is mostly a dry accounting of the appropriations so far. It parses its number in various ways. The war in Iraq is the most expensive piece at \$815 billion. Afghanistan has cost \$686 billion. The Defense Department has overseen \$1.5 trillion of the spending. The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development have received \$93 billion, while Congress has appropriated \$17.6 billion to pay for medical care for the wounded. Totals rose until fiscal 2008 when they hit a peak of \$195 billion and have declined since.

The author, Amy Belasco, a specialist in U.S. defense policy and budget, has been tracking the cost of the wars since 2001, and she makes a case that Congress has mostly given both Obama and George W. Bush before him what the administrations have wanted. Even the tight spending caps that Congress enacted in 2011's Budget Control Act, and the across-the-board cuts that followed, have mostly left war funding untouched. Early in the war, Congress enacted emergency spending measures to cover war costs, exempting them from budget controls. More recently, Congress has funded an Overseas Contingency Operations budget at the Pentagon to avoid spending limits.

In some cases, Congress has put more in the fund than the administration requested. "Congress has actually been a greater offender in this area," said Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee, at a hearing last year. Added Bill Pascrell Jr., a New Jersey Democrat on the panel: "The administration, the Congress have used the [Overseas Contingency Operations] budget in the past to skirt the Budget Control Act caps."

Congress has mostly given in to the Pentagon's requests for more flexibility over its war-fighting funds. Belasco notes that since the 2001 terrorist attacks, Congress has created 10 new flexible funding streams from which the DoD can draw without having to get Congress' permission on how to use the money. Between fiscal 2005 and fiscal 2014, she finds that Congress has allowed the Defense Department to spend between 15 percent and 23 percent of its war budget this way.

And she raises questions about whether Defense has inflated its budget requests for the war. The department has allowed more than 2 percent of its war funding to lapse each year, on average - money that is supposed to be repaid to the Treasury, though Defense has also occasionally used money from its base budget to cover war costs. In addition, during the 2013 sequestration, when Congress ordered the Department of Defense to find \$37.2 billion in

cuts, the department opted for an across-the-board cut to both its war funding and base budget, indicating there's some fat in the war budget.

Certainly, Defense has not always spent its war funds to the maximum effect. Belasco focuses on the tens of billions the Pentagon has received to help train and equip Iraqi and Afghan military forces. Congress has rarely questioned these requests, but it's plain that the Pentagon's efforts haven't worked out very well. Last year, Iraqi security forces lost crucial battles to Islamic militia, forcing the United States to conduct bombing raids and send military advisers to help protect Baghdad. As U.S. forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan, the same problem could arise there. Afghan forces show many of the same problems as those in Iraq, writes Belasco, and continue to be tested by Taliban insurgents. About a third of Afghan soldiers quit each year, and new, perhaps less well-trained recruits take their place.

A Broad Economic Impact

Plenty of activists and scholars have tried to draw attention to the costs of the war on terrorism over the past decade. In 2010, scholars at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University assembled more than 30 economists, anthropologists, lawyers, humanitarian personnel and political scientists to compile a comprehensive assessment of the war's costs. The Costs of War Project issued its report in 2011, since updated, that puts the total cost at more than \$4.4 trillion.

The project members say that while the spending has given the U.S. economy a boost, it is "small and declining." The economic effect of all the spending has been muted because the government borrowed the money for the wars, incurring debt and raising interest rates. The scholars project that by 2023 the U.S. will have paid \$1 trillion in interest on its war debt. They figure that interest rates are about a third of a percentage point higher now than they would have been, absent the loans, forcing every borrower to pay more to service debt to buy a home or run a business. Their report says that "estimates suggest that in total, war spending has probably raised Gross Domestic Product by .5 percent in 2011, but the net effect will fall to zero by 2020 and turn negative" as the war's costs continue to drag on the economy.

Linda J. Bilmes, a lecturer at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, goes further. "If you'd spent the money on digging holes and filling them in, that would have stimulated the economy more," she says, given that some of the spending was lost to corruption or went to foreign contractors.

Bilmes and Columbia University economist Joseph E. Stiglitz have written a book on the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and pegged it at \$3 trillion or more. They include in that tally the human productivity lost in the deaths and injuries of soldiers and the time family members have spent caring for the wounded. They also count rising oil costs, which they link to the reduction in refining capacity caused by the Iraq war. Stiglitz believes that the financial crisis of 2008 is in part a result of the wars, arguing that the easy money policy adopted by the Federal Reserve in response to rising oil prices may have led to excessive risk-taking on Wall Street.

The National Priorities Project, an advocacy group in Massachusetts, has tried to draw attention to war spending by offering ideas on how Congress might have otherwise spent the money, and by breaking down the costs of war borne by each taxpayer. Heidi Garrett-Peltier, an economist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says if the money had been spent on more labor-intensive fields, such as clean energy development, education or health care, it would have created between 1 million and 2 million more jobs.

Even defense hawks such as Judd Gregg, a former Republican senator from New Hampshire who served as Budget Committee chairman, say the CRS tally of costs is too limited. "The \$1.6 trillion is extremely conservative," he says. "Look at the hardening of security in cities and police departments, the reallocation of resources by business in cyber-defense, the reallocation of resources to protect infrastructure, electrical transmission lines and financial houses."

But where Gregg and many of his colleagues in Congress differ from the advocates and the scholars is over the value of the spending. He says that, certainly, Congress should do a better job of scrutinizing war costs and should try harder to offset the expenses. But he won't join Shays in suggesting that Congress has been derelict in its duties.

"The first obligation of the federal government is to defend the country," Gregg says. "You spend whatever it takes."

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24. Few Weapons Left for Defense Firms

Wall Street Journal, Jan. 26, Pg. B2 | Doug Cameron

U.S. defense companies became a safe haven for investors over the past two years, but new leadership in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill could reduce some of the advantages that helped the sector outperform the broader market over the past two years, even as industry sales declined.

The five prime contractors that dominate Pentagon spending have cut thousands of workers, used big stock buybacks and benefited from pension tailwinds. This week's year-end reports and 2015 outlooks from Lockheed Martin Corp. General Dynamics Corp. and others will give shareholders a peek into plans for the two weapons they haven't widely deployed -- more investment and a return to large-scale acquisitions.

Research-and-development spending by the big five contractors has halved to around 2% of sales over the past five years, irking a Defense Department that wants contractors to take on more risk and invest more to counter growing threats from China and Russia.

The new Congress has pledged to try -- again, after decades of false starts -- to stamp out delays and cost overruns on big programs like the \$400 billion F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.

Just as importantly, shareholders are starting to ask where growth will come from as the industry enters its third year of declining sales, driven by the budget cuts that started around 2012 at the Pentagon, which remains by far their largest customer.

"The appropriate debate [this year] is 'What is the growth rate?' " said Carter Copeland, sector analyst at Barclays.

The Pentagon budget for fiscal 2016, due to be rolled out the week of Feb. 2, could lead to a modest expansion in funding over prior years, but contractors admit they remain uncertain if this will carry into future years and make 2016 the trough for spending.

Even so, falling revenues haven't deterred investors. Defense stocks have become more widely held in portfolios, and the sector climbed more than 30% last year after gains of around 50% in 2013. Lockheed and Northrop

Grumman Corp. both reached record highs last week, with most of the sector remaining close to peaks while still remaining cheaper than other industrial companies such as utilities and consumer staples.

The uncertainty over budget levels has led management -- three of the five largest defense companies have installed new CEOs over the past two years -- away from the large-scale deals that dominated the downturn of the 1990s, preferring to divert most free cash to buybacks and higher dividends, buoying per-share earnings.

The companies have also benefited from their relatively low exposure to overseas markets, currency swings and the energy industry that have weighed on diversified industrials, though analysts expect falling oil prices to have some impact if big oil producers in the Middle East and North Africa re-examine their budget plans.

Analysts said there is little incentive for managements to deviate from the focus on buybacks and improving efficiency, but repurchases could run out of steam with valuations at or near-record levels.

"There's just not that many levers left for these guys to pull," said David Strauss, an analyst at UBS in New York. "At some point a return to fundamentals has to matter, I just don't think we're there yet."

One trigger could come from Congress, with twin hearings Wednesday that will provide the first signs of how lawmakers plan to direct spending.

Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, is a longtime critic of cost overruns and delays on big programs such as the F-35 and the Littoral Combat Ship, and plans to grill senior leaders from all four services about the impact of budget cuts.

Rep. Mac Thornberry (R., Texas), who has led the congressional effort to reform defense acquisitions and who now chairs the House Armed Services Committee, has called a hearing the same day featuring Frank Kendall, the Pentagon's chief arms buyer.

Most investors remain skeptical of any short-term changes that might bite into defense companies' profits or push them to shift from a focus on buybacks toward more internal investment or even larger acquisitions.

"The Pentagon can rattle the cage all it wants; [it] doesn't serve the shareholders," said Susan Schmidt, managing director for U.S. value equities at Mesirow Financial Holdings Inc. in Chicago.

However, one wild card is the increase in the global terror threat following the attacks in Paris, Ottawa and elsewhere. Byron Callan at Capital Alpha LLC said there is a major disconnect between public perceptions of an increasingly dangerous world -- particularly if there's another major attack against the U.S. -- and a Pentagon focused on sovereign threats and perfecting big weapons' programs that will be rolled out over the next 20 to 30 years.

"How much more funding would the public support for defense, security and related stabilization operations to address sources of terrorism while at the same time funding major new conventional weapons modernization programs?" he said.

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ARMY

25. Couple referred 2,070 soldiers

Nearly 50 times that of next highest in Army program

USA Today, Jan. 26, Pg. A5 | Tom Vanden Brook

The Texas couple who reaped nearly \$4 million in recruiting bonuses from the Army referred nearly 50 times as many recruits as the next highest recipient in the Army's defunct bounty program for new soldiers, records show.

Rene and Vanessa Agosto, both civilian employees of the military, sent the Army the names of 2,070 people who became soldiers.

The referral bonus program ran from 2006 to 2009 during a recruiting crisis that coincided with the worst fighting of the Iraq War.

The second-place finisher in the program referred 44 recruits, records show. In all, the Army spent about \$40 million to collect the names of 24,000 recruits.

Meanwhile, e-mails obtained by USA TODAY show that Army officials were informed about the Agostos' recruiting website by a military official who was concerned about its propriety and legality. The Army, however, approved the site and suggested to the Agostos ways to avoid trademark infringement, documents show.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat and ranking member of the permanent subcommittee on investigations, has asked Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Army Secretary John McHugh to explain how the program was so easily gamed and why the Agostos should remain government employees.

"How this scheme didn't stick out like a sore thumb to the Army is beyond me," McCaskill told USA TODAY. "These folks successfully pocketed millions of taxpayer dollars, a fact made even more troubling considering Army officials had full knowledge of this wasteful scheme and did nothing to stop it."

USA TODAY reported last week that the Agostos set up a website designed to look like an official Army portal for potential recruits. They forwarded to the Army names of people who provided personal information to their site, OfficialArmy.com, and collected \$2,000 per recruit. In a brief e-mail exchange, Rene Agosto said he had received permission from Army lawyers and officials to maintain the site.

Agosto, in e-mails from 2007, told officials that Army criminal investigators and recruiting officials had approved his website.

By referring more than 2,000 new soldiers over a period of a few years, the Agostos far outpaced even the most experienced Army recruiter, according to a retired soldier with years of experience in recruiting.

The retired recruiter spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the goals. A full-time Army recruiter signs up about 1.5 soldiers per month on an annual basis. Top producers, who are rare, sign up three per month, the retired recruiter said.

The Army halted the bonus program in 2009 when it determined that incentives were no longer needed to meet goals, according to Lt. Col. Don Peters, an Army spokesman.

NAVY

26. Navy wants to increase use of sonar-emitting buoys

Associated Press, Jan. 25 | Phuong Le

SEATTLE — The U.S. Navy is seeking permits to expand sonar and other training exercises off the Pacific Coast, a proposal raising concerns from animal advocates who say that more sonar-emitting buoys would harm whales and other creatures that live in the water.

The Navy wants to deploy up to 720 sonobuoys at least 12 nautical miles (22 kilometers) off the coasts of Washington state, Oregon and Northern California. The devices, about 3 feet (90 centimeters) long and 6 inches (15 centimeters) in diameter, send out sonar signals underwater so air crews can train to detect submarines.

"It sounds drastic in numbers, but it's really not drastic in its impact," said John Mosher, Northwest environmental manager for the U.S. Pacific Fleet. "Anti-submarine warfare is a critical mission for the U.S. Navy."

The Navy's training range is home to endangered whales such as orcas, humpback and blue, as well as seals, sea lions and dolphins.

Critics say the noise from sonar can harass and kill whales and other marine life. They worry the Navy is expanding training exercises without also increasing efforts to reduce the impacts.

Steve Mashuda, a lawyer with the public-interest law firm Earthjustice, said they're not asking the Navy to stop training in the area.

"But it's a big ocean out there. You don't need to have all of those square miles of training available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week," said Mashuda, whose group previously sued over permits issued to the Navy.

The Navy needs authorization from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, since explosive detonations, sonar and vessel strikes have the potential to disturb, injure or kill marine mammals. Its current five-year permit expires this year.

The Navy's preferred alternative proposes 30 bombing exercises a year, as well as increased air-to-surface missile exercises and anti-submarine tracking activities that use sonar. It is taking comments through Feb. 2 on its updated proposal.

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NOTABLE COMMENTARY

27. Our Man in Damascus

Wall Street Journal, Jan. 26, Pg. A14 | Editorial

President Obama is cutting short his visit to India to stop in Saudi Arabia to pay his respects on the death of King Abdullah and no doubt try to repair what has been a fraying relationship. It's a good move, but he'll need an explanation for the latest stories that the U.S. is suddenly prepared to live with Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

For several years Mr. Obama has said Assad must leave power as part of ending Syria's four-year civil war. But Administration sources are now leaking that the President thinks Assad and his Alawite regime may be part of the solution. The thinking seems to be that the priority now is defeating Islamic State, and Assad is an ally in that effort.

Where to begin? As the Saudis will point out, the first problem with these leaks is that they send a confusing signal about U.S. policy. When he unrolled his anti-Islamic State (ISIS) strategy in September, Mr. Obama promised to support anti-Assad rebels who aren't aligned with ISIS or al Qaeda. This is hard enough given Mr. Obama's failure to protect the rebels against Assad's air force. But it will be impossible if the world thinks Assad is our man in Damascus after all.

Aligning with Assad will also undermine the anti-ISIS coalition that Mr. Obama said in his State of the Union address is broad and stalwart. Apart from the Iraqis and Kurds, the two most important nations in that coalition are Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Both are enemies of Assad and have been urging the U.S. to more actively assist in his ouster. The Turks in particular have offered only tepid support because Mr. Obama won't assist the anti-Assad rebels with some kind of no-fly safe haven.

Assad and Iran also aren't doing all that much to defeat Islamic State, which continues to hold major chunks of Syria. Instead they have focused on defeating the non-jihadist rebels that Mr. Obama has said the U.S. supports. This makes strategic sense for Assad, who wants to become the only alternative to ISIS so the West will have nowhere else to turn.

The longer-term worry is that propping up Assad will assist Iran's strategy to become the dominant regional power to the detriment of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Israel. Those U.S. allies fear that this is precisely what Mr. Obama is moving toward -- an entente with Iran that starts with a nuclear accord that leaves Tehran on the cusp of having the bomb whenever it chooses. Then the U.S. winks at Assad's survival in Syria.

In return, Iran doesn't interfere with the U.S.-Baghdad-Kurdish offensive this year to reclaim Iraqi territory from ISIS. Islamic State might be diminished, but the price would be an arc of Iranian influence from the Persian Gulf through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean.

How this helps America's long-term interests is hard to see. The U.S. would have degraded one radical jihadist threat, ISIS, in return for empowering another one, Shiite radicals backed by the bomb. Congress should ask the Administration to clarify if Assad really is Mr. Obama's man in Damascus.

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28. Cozying up to the dictators

Washington Post, Jan. 26, Pg. A17 | Fred Hiatt

As President Obama stumbles in implementing his own strategy for combating terrorism, the United States is reverting, almost by default, to an earlier, failed approach: a reliance on dictators to do our dirty work.

The latest, and saddest, indication of Obama's capitulation to this oldthink has been signals sent by his administration that the United States will no longer insist on Bashar al-Assad's departure as leader of Syria, as Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard recently reported in the New York Times.

Obama's demand that Assad leave was never more than rhetorical. Still, it has to be dispiriting for the president who created the Atrocities Prevention Board ("President Obama has made the prevention of atrocities a key focus of this Administration's foreign policy," a White House fact sheet says) to acknowledge implicitly that he has no Syria strategy without Assad.

Assad is the bloodiest butcher of this young century, but he's hardly the only example of the United States' reborn love of strongmen. Egypt's new dictator has killed and imprisoned opponents with a brazenness Hosni Mubarak never dreamed of. The State Department is eager to embrace him in a new partnership.

Obama used to insist that the government of Bahrain "engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail." Now, as Bahrain cracks down on peaceful dissidents, the United States barely notices.

In Central Asia's Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, 76, presides over a closed society of prison camps and forced labor. But immediately after he announced he would rule for five more years - after all, he's been in charge only since 1989 - the United States approved a shipment of weaponry for his government and counseled "a certain amount of strategic patience in how change can take place."

From Azerbaijan to Saudi Arabia, where Obama will visit Tuesday, the United States is cozying up to dictators who share some key attributes. They agree with the United States that Islamic extremism must be fought. But they also go after nonviolent opponents - and they are most ferocious against secular, liberal critics. By destroying any moderate forces, they can present themselves as the only alternative to religious fundamentalism.

If partnering with these people offered an effective defense against terrorism, maybe it would be worth overcoming any moral qualms.

In fact, though, their actions will create more trouble down the road - as Obama himself explained in 2011.

"Societies held together by fear and repression may offer the illusion of stability for a time, but they are built upon fault lines that will eventually tear asunder," the president said. "[S]trategies of repression and strategies of diversion will not work anymore. . . . The status quo is not sustainable."

Obama promised a historic shift in policy, away from the short-term comfort of alliances with dictators and toward promoting "self-determination and opportunity."

"After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be," the president said.

So what happened? The Arab Spring didn't go as hoped - and the United States began to lose the war. An al-Qaeda offshoot shockingly conquered large swaths of Iraq and Syria. Libya descended into civil war. Yemen, which Obama cited just last year as proof of his successful strategy, is on a similar downward spiral. The Taliban is gaining ground in Afghanistan. Boko Haram is carving out another space for barbarism in Nigeria.

When Obama is questioned about this picture, he generally stands up his favorite straw man: "If the assertion is, is that had we invaded Syria we would be less prone to terrorist attacks, I'll leave it to you to play out that scenario and whether that sounds accurate," he said during his recent news conference with British leader David Cameron.

But that is not the assertion. What critics suggest is that Obama should implement the strategy he outlined in a speech at West Point in May: not a U.S. invasion, not a subcontracting of the war to heavy-handed dictators, but "a network of partnerships from South Asia to the Sahel" with moderate forces committed to fighting extremism.

Unfortunately, Obama has put little meat on that strategy. He toppled Libya's strongman, then abandoned the country. He pulled all advisers out of Iraq and vows to do the same to Afghanistan. He emphasizes drone strikes, but with little of the institution-building that would engender cooperation over the long term. Help for Syrian moderates has been promised again and again for four years, with little to show for it. And instead of building public support for what must be a long and difficult effort, Obama barnstorms the country boasting that "our troops are coming home."

Which is true, for the moment. But as his reluctant redeployment of 3,000 troops to Iraq demonstrates, it will not stay true if the terrorists continue to advance. A partnership with the devil of Mideast autocracy will, in the long run, only stoke that advance.

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29. The U.S. Needs a New Yardstick for a New Kind of War

America keeps measuring progress on a battlefield that no longer exists

Time.com, Jan. 25 | Mark Thompson

Body counts are never a good a yardstick for measuring progress in a war of ideas. That's why the Pentagon freaked out Thursday when Stuart Jones, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, told the Al Arabiya News Channel that America and its allies "have now killed more than 6,000 ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq."

The first counter-fire came, within hours, from Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. "I was in a war where there was a lot of body counts every day," the outgoing defense chief, who served as an Army sergeant in the Vietnam War, said in one of his most pungent observations in his two years on the job. "And we lost that war."

Hagel's spokesman piled on Friday. "It's not a metric that we're going to hang our hat on when it comes to talking to the success of this strategy," Rear Admiral John Kirby said of the Pentagon's internal body-count estimate. "This is not a uniformed army with identification cards and recruiting posters."

While Ambassador Jones added that the 6,000 number was "not so important" in the overall scheme of things, the catnip was out of the bag. That's because Americans, impatient over wars that drag on (like Hagel's Vietnam and George W. Bush's Afghanistan and Iraq), crave measurements that suggest progress.

Unfortunately, that metric mindset has little utility in wars against ideology. "I don't know whether 6,000 [ISIS] people have been killed or not," California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the intelligence committee, told CBS's Face the Nation on Sunday. "But that is not going to do it."

That's because conflicts like the one now underway against the Islamist fundamentalism represented by the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) are not constrained by national boundaries, or the national pressure points that have traditionally been the trigger of wars (and the foundation of ending them) among states.

Without the trappings of formal government—a capital, commerce, standing armies—non-state actors like ISIS or al-Qaeda deny military powers like the U.S. the kinds of targets they prefer. Their allegiance to ideology—be it theology or something else—takes away the fulcrum that victors used to leverage to bring wars to an end.

Industrial powers created industrial militaries, where rear-echelon bean-counters could tote up tanks, ball-bearing factories and troops destroyed—and thereby chart progress, or the lack thereof. But ideological war isn't industrial in scope. Instead, it's more like information warfare, where ideas, shared online, create alliances that ripple across borders and oceans.

It took a Detroit to build an industrial arsenal of democracy, with each weapon requiring dollars and sweat to assemble. Today, it merely takes a keyboard to build an ideological alliance, each member a low-cost addition requiring little more than fervor and an Internet connection.

The Administration of George W. Bush concluded the way to prevail after the 9/11 attacks was to invade and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq. Following wars that eventually will cost \$3 trillion or more, and at least 6,845 American lives, his successor has decided not to tag along. Instead, President Barack Obama has told the nations involved—those with the most at risk—to step up to the plate to do the fighting, with the U.S. filling the role of best supporting actor.

Some see such a policy as too timid. “The U.S. efforts have always been halfhearted, half-resourced and focused on exit strategies rather than on success,” says David Sedney, who ran the Pentagon office responsible for Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia from 2009 to 2013. “We always want to have an exit, and the problem with real life is there's no exit.” He argues that the U.S. needs to launch nation-building strategies in failed states that currently serve as incubators for ISIS and other groups.

Politicians aren't calling for such radical action. But some believe the U.S. needs to step up the fight. “We need more boots on the ground,” Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, the new chairman of the Armed Services Committee, told CBS on Sunday. “I know that is a tough thing to say and a tough thing for Americans to swallow, but it doesn't mean the 82nd Airborne. It means forward air controllers. It means special forces. It means intelligence and it means other capabilities.”

The U.S., McCain said, can't simply direct wars against ISIS and similar foes from relative safety behind the front lines. “For [the Administration] to say, ‘we expect [Iraq and Yemen] to do it on their own,’ they're not doing it on their own,” he said. “And they are losing.”

The last clear victory scored by the U.S. military was against Iraq in 1991, led by President George H.W. Bush, a Cold War commander-in-chief. It was a bespoke war tailor-made for the Pentagon: Iraq's massive army stormed into Kuwait, occupied it, and waited for the U.S. and its allies to drive it out.

The world watched that conflict and decided, given Washington's overwhelming advantages in that kind of war, not to fight it again. Unfortunately, too many Americans seem unaware that the rules have changed. So they continue to want to measure progress in today's conflicts with yesterday's yardsticks.

But such yearnings are doomed. Persistence and will, not body bags, are the keys to winning these kinds of wars.

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30. How to halt next terror generation

Policies to prevent attacks alone are not enough. We must defeat extremist ideology

USA Today, Jan. 26, Pg. A7 | Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton

Ideas are not easily destroyed. Bullets could not extinguish the irreverence of Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical newspaper recently targeted by terrorists. Nor can increased counterterrorism efforts alone eradicate the radical Islamist incitement to violence that inspired recent atrocities in Ottawa, Sydney, Paris and Peshawar. Such policies help prevent the next terrorist attack but cannot stop the cultivation of the next generation of terrorists. For that, we must defeat and discredit this extremist ideology.

Until 2001, terrorism was perceived mostly as a law enforcement problem. The 9/11 attacks made clear that terrorism was a grave national security threat, requiring the use of all instruments of national power. Since then, America and its allies have hardened their defenses, greatly improved intelligence-sharing, increased counterterrorism cooperation and decimated the centralized leadership of the "core" al-Qaeda organization.

Although our own homeland is safer, violence perpetrated in the name of radical Islam -- as the Paris attacks painfully remind us -- has not abated. Nor will it, until we address its root cause: radical Islamist ideology.

Paris a wake-up call

The sojourn of the Kouachi brothers with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the burgeoning number of Westerners heeding the Islamic State's appeal to take up arms in Syria are a wake-up call. Both the ability of jihadists to communicate, plan, organize, propagandize, recruit and radicalize online and the continued porousness of international borders, such as that between Turkey and Syria, erode the distinction between battlefield and homeland, terrorist networks and lone wolves, foreign fighters and homegrown terrorists.

As long as the pull of violent, virulent Islamism remains constant, new forms of terrorism will appear faster than we can develop policies to counter them.

Since 9/11, we have honed our tactics for stopping terrorists; now it's time to begin discrediting the perverse ideology that inspires them. As we wrote in The 9/11 Commission Report, "Our strategy must match our means to two ends: dismantling the al-Qaeda network and prevailing in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism." Too little attention and resources have been devoted to the second element of this strategy.

The U.S. has many strengths that could help prevent the spread of Islamist extremism. The rule of law, political and economic openness, and personal autonomy are anathema to extremists but are admired by most countries. So is the fact that the U.S. is always quick to respond to human-caused and natural disasters, by bringing medical expertise and supplies, shelter, food, water, logistics and transportation after tragedy has struck.

What USA must do

During the Cold War, the U.S. had an established infrastructure and lasting commitment to leveraging these assets to defeat another threatening ideology: global communism. In a related vein, the U.S. today must promote its values and spread its messages to turn people from violent Islamism. This means developing, funding and implementing more focused, better targeted instruments of public diplomacy for the 21st century by, for example, harnessing the strengths of Silicon Valley to counter extremists' success on social media, or significantly increasing and improving the quality of U.S.- funded broadcasting in the Middle East.

Although the U.S. can promote moderation, it cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do that. Fortunately, this is beginning to happen. The U.S. should support governments, organizations and peoples that are taking active measures to defeat violent extremist ideology, such as catalyzing partnerships with leading media channels in the Muslim world to produce programming that fosters moderation.

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, President Obama invited our allies to a Feb. 18 summit in Washington to discuss how to counter violent extremism. World leaders should devote considerable time and attention at the summit to agreeing on a long-term plan for positively influencing the forces of moderate Islam and discrediting those who choose the path of violence.

We must continue to do everything possible to thwart attacks, but preventing attacks alone is insufficient. We must also stop the forces that spawn new generations ready to take the lives of innocents. No longer can we neglect the difficult task of addressing the Islamist extremism that fuels terrorism.

--Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton are the former chairman and vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission and are co-chairs of the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Security Program

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