

The Greater Middle East's Greatest Rebuff to Uncle Sam

By [Dilip Hiro](http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175753/)

What if the sole superpower on the planet makes its will known -- repeatedly -- and finds that no one is listening? Barely a decade ago, that would have seemed like a conundrum from some fantasy Earth in an alternate dimension. Now, it is increasingly a plain description of political life on our globe, especially in the Greater Middle East.

In the future, the indecent haste with which Barack Obama sought cover under the umbrella unfurled by his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in the Syrian chemical weapons crisis will be viewed as a watershed moment when it comes to America's waning power in that region. In the aptly named "arc of instability," the lands from the Chinese border to northern Africa that President George W. Bush and his neocon acolytes dreamed of thoroughly pacifying, turmoil is on the rise. Ever fewer countries, allies, or enemies, are paying attention, much less kowtowing, to the once-formidable power of the world's last superpower. The list of defiant figures -- from Egyptian generals to Saudi princes, Iraqi Shiite leaders to Israeli politicians -- is lengthening.

The signs of this loss of clout have been legion in recent years. In August 2011, for instance, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ignored Obama's unambiguous call for him "to step aside." Nothing happened even after an unnamed senior administration official [insisted](#), "We are certain Assad is on the way out." As the saying goes, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Similarly, in March 2010, Obama personally delivered a half-hour-long chewing out of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, a politician Washington installed in office, on the corruption and administrative ineptitude of his government. It was coupled with a warning that, if he [failed to act](#), a cut in U.S. aid would follow. Instead, the next month the Obama administration gave him the

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red carpet treatment on a visit to Washington with scarcely a whisper about the graft and ill-governance that continues to this day.

In May 2009, during his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Obama demanded a halt to the expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and in occupied East Jerusalem. In the tussle that followed, the sole superpower lost out and settlement expansion continued.

These are among the many examples of America's slumping authority in the Greater Middle East, a process well underway even before Obama entered the Oval Office in January 2009. It had, for years, been increasingly apparent that Washington's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with several lesser campaigns in the Global War on Terror, were doomed. In his inaugural address, Obama swore that the United States was now "ready to lead the world." It was a prediction that would be proven disastrously wrong in the Greater Middle East.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Invaded and occupied Afghanistan was to be the starting point for phase two in the triumphant singular supremacy of Uncle Sam. The first phase had ended in December 1991 with the titanic collapse of its partner in a MAD -- that is, mutually assured destruction -- world, the Soviet Union. A decade later, Washington was poised to banish [assorted "terror" constellations](#) from nearly 80 countries and to bring about regime change for the "Axis of Evil" (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea). Having defeated the "Evil Empire" of the Soviets, Washington couldn't have felt more confident when it came to achieving this comparatively modest aim.

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Priority was initially given to sometime ally and client state Pakistan, the main player in creating the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s. Much to the chagrin of policymakers in Washington, however, the rulers of Pakistan, military and civilian, turned out to be masters at squeezing the most out of the United States (which found itself inescapably dependent on their country to prosecute its Afghan war), while delivering the least in return.

Today, the crumbling economy of Pakistan is in such a dire state that its government can keep going only by receiving handouts from the U.S. and regular rollover loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since the IMF arrangement is subject to Washington's say-so, it seemed logical that the Obama administration could bend Islamabad to its diktats. Yet Pakistani leaders seldom let a chance pass to highlight American diplomatic impotence, if only to garner some respect from their own citizens, most of whom harbor an unfavorable view of the U.S.

A case in point has been the daredevil actions of Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the founder-leader of the Lashkar-e Taiba (Army of the Pure, or LeT), listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations following its involvement in the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, which killed 166 people, including six Americans. In April 2012, the State Department announced a \$10 million reward for information leading to Saeed's arrest and conviction. The bearded 62-year-old militant leader promptly called a press conference and [declared](#), "I am here. America should give that reward money to me."

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In mid-September, Prime Minister Sharif returned the favor by securing an all-party consensus in the National Assembly to negotiate peace with the Pakistani Taliban without conditions. Militant leaders then raised the stakes by [insisting](#) that his government first devise a policy to halt the ongoing U.S. drone campaign against them in the country's tribal borderlands.

This compelled the Sharif government to announce that it would [raise the issue](#) of the American drone campaign at the United Nations General Assembly. Its move is likely to coincide with a

[report](#)

by Ben Emmerson, the UN special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism, on U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia to be presented to the General Assembly in October. Emmerson has already described Washington's drone campaign as a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty.

In addition, [ignoring](#) Washington's reported disapproval, Sharif's government has started [releasing](#)

Afghan Taliban prisoners -- one of them "of high value" in the lexicon of the White House -- from its jails to facilitate what it calls "reconciliation" in Afghanistan. As yet, however, there is no sign that Mullah Muhammad Omar, the supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban (widely believed to be under surreptitious Pakistani protection), is ready to negotiate with the government of Karzai whom he regularly denounces as an American puppet.

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In early August, in his annual Eid al Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast) [message](#) , Omar was unmistakably hawkish. “As to the deceiving drama under the name of elections 2014, our pious people will not tire themselves out, nor will they participate in it,” he said. He then called for continued struggle against U.S.-led NATO troops and their Afghan allies, and urged Kabul's security forces to direct their guns at foreign soldiers, government officials, and Afghans cooperating with the U.S.-led troops.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has been pressuring Karzai to sign an agreement that, among other things, would allow the Pentagon to maintain a significant “footprint” in Afghanistan under the rubric of “training Afghan forces” after the withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO combat troops by December 2014. So far, despite his dependence on Washington for his political survival, Karzai has been [playing hardball](#) .

In this, Washington is heading down a familiar path. In Iraq, both the Bush and Obama administrations tried to reach an agreement with a government the U.S. had helped install to leave behind 10,000-20,000 military trainers and special operations troops. It [failed](#) when the pro-Tehran, Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki doggedly refused.

These days, despite the repeated U.S. complaints and requests, the Maliki government [continues](#)

to allow Iranian arms to be sent overland and through its air space to the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In late August, during the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, Iraq

[even declared](#)

that it wouldn't allow its airspace to be used for military strikes on Syria.

The Diminishing “Coalition of the Willing”

In a controversial *New York Times* [op-ed](#) on September 11th, Russian President Putin wrote of President Obama's plan to launch a military strike against Damascus, “It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts has become commonplace for the United States... Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan, ‘you're either with us or against us.’”

Only days earlier, however, President Obama had failed to form a “coalition of the willing” on the Syrian issue at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg, managing to rally only 10 members. Those who opposed military strikes against Syria without a U.N. Security Council mandate included the five-strong BRICS powers -- Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa -- along with Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, and Argentina.

A week earlier, the British parliament [defeated](#) a motion to join a U.S.-led operation against Syria. With the British “poodle” slipping Washington's leash -- an unprecedented act in recent memory -- Obama was lost.

In desperation, he turned to Congress, where, thousands of miles from the Greater Middle

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East, only a minority tuned in. Responding to the overwhelming sentiments of their constituents and [opinion polls](#) showing that remarkably few Americans believed an attack on Syria in national interest, the lawmakers started lining up to give Obama a resounding thumbs-down. It was only then, after an [offhand remark](#) by his Secretary of State John Kerry was taken up by Moscow, that Obama went on television and accepted the outlines of Putin's proposed plan for Syria's chemical weapons.

A Landmark Deal Underscores U.S. Decline

Undoubtedly, the Syrian deal struck in Geneva between Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov favored the Kremlin. It put any American attack firmly on the back burner. It brought the U.N. Security Council, earlier skirted by the Obama White House, center-stage as the primary agency to implement and supervise the deal. In the process, it underscored the continuing influence of Russia as a permanent member of the Council with a veto. Moscow also managed to spare the Assad regime the degradation of its military capabilities that would have resulted from the Pentagon's strikes. In so doing, it enabled the Syrian leader to maintain the current battlefield superiority of his forces. Overall, the Syrian rebels and Washington were unmitigated losers.

Among other losers were Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan. On the opposite side of the equation were Iran and the military rulers of Egypt, albeit for diametrically contrary reasons. For Tehran, a Syria governed by Assad, a member of the Alawi sub-sect within Shiite Islam, is a linchpin in the axis of resistance against Israel. For the generals in Cairo, the demon is the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Syrian branch is the foremost foe of Assad.

Having overthrown Muhammad Morsi, the first democratically elected ruler in Egypt's long

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history, the generals are now busily attempting to eradicate the Brotherhood itself, the oldest political party in the region. Following their July 3rd coup, they were reassured when Obama, though perturbed by their actions, meticulously [avoided using](#) that word "coup," which would have resulted in a suspension of aid as mandated by the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act. In contrast, his administration did suspend aid to the African state of Mali in March 2012 when, in a bloodless coup, the military toppled democratically elected President Amadou Toure.

If Obama was having second thoughts on his Egyptian policy, “[marathon phone calls](#)” from Jerusalem evidently ensured that no significant action would be taken against the military junta.

Israel's prime minister and foreign minister Benjamin Netanyahu, defense minister Moshe Yaalon, and national security adviser Yaakov Amidror engaged their American counterparts -- Kerry, Chuck Hagel, and Susan Rice -- in telephone conversations urging them [not to freeze](#)

the \$1.3 billion in military aid to the post-Morsi regime.

To the delight of the generals in Cairo, Israel's lobbying continued unabated in Washington. Among others, Michael B. Oren, Israel's ambassador in Washington, argued forcefully for an uninterrupted flow of U.S. aid. “Israel has been waging an almost desperate diplomatic battle in Washington,” [wrote](#) Alex Fishman, a leading Israeli columnist, in *Yediot Aharonot* on August 25. That was just 10 days after Egypt's Interior Ministry troops had massacred nearly 1,000 Brotherhood supporters while clearing two protest sites in Cairo where pro-Morsi partisans had been staging peaceful open air sit-ins. Obama responded by

[saying](#)

, “Our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed in the streets and rights are being rolled back.” But all he did was to

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an upcoming annual joint military exercise with Egypt.

The evident impotence of Washington before yet another client state with an economy in freefall was highlighted by the [revelation](#) that since the ouster of Morsi, Secretary of Defense Hagel had 15 telephone conversations with Egyptian Defense Minister General Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, the coup leader, pleading with him to “change course” -- but in vain -- a repeat of Washington's experience with Karzai, the Pakistani leaders, and Assad.

The threat that Washington might cut-off its [military aid](#) to Egypt was promptly countered by its long-standing ally in the region: Saudi Arabia. In a gesture of undisguised defiance of U.S. wishes, Saudi foreign minister Saud al Faisal

[pledged publicly](#)

that his country would fill any financial gaps left if the U.S. and the European Union withdrew aid to Cairo. With Riyadh's budget surplus of \$103 billion last year, his words carried weight.

Within a week of the coup in Cairo, the three oil-rich states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates -- each dependent on the Pentagon for its external security -- [poured](#) \$ 12 billion into the bankrupt Egyptian treasury. In this way, these autocratic monarchies encouraged the military junta to defy Washington's pleas for a return to democracy.

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Launching a blitz of jingoistic propaganda and pumping up Egyptian xenophobia, the generals have gone beyond thumbing their noses at Uncle Sam. They have even concocted wild theories about how Washington has colluded with the Muslim Brotherhood. These are now being assiduously peddled through the state-controlled media and its compliant private sector counterpart.

In late August, for instance, the state-owned newspaper, *Al Ahram*, citing “security sources,” published a sensational [fr ont-page story](#)

by its editor-in-chief Abdel Nasser Salama. It claimed the authorities had foiled a plot involving U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson, Brotherhood leader Kharat El Shater (by then under arrest), “37 terrorists,” and 200 Gaza-based jihadists to infiltrate the Sinai Peninsula through clandestine tunnels between the two territories, and create chaos. This was to be a preamble to isolating Upper Egypt and declaring it independent of Cairo. In response, Ambassador Patterson did no more than send a note of protest to Salama. Such stories have become grist for the Egyptian rumor mill and are transforming fantasies into facts in the popular psyche.

At the turn of the century, who could have imagined that barely a decade later an official mouthpiece for an emergent military dictator in Egypt, a client state of Uncle Sam for a quarter of a century, would have the audacity to malign Washington in this way while its generous aid package continued to flow in uninterrupted? If you need a marker for the waning of American power in the Greater Middle East, look no further.

Dilip Hiro, a [TomDispatch regular](#), has written 34 books, including *After Empire: The Birth of a Multipolar World*. *His*

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latest book is □

[A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Middle East](#)

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