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"I HAVE TODAY'S SCHEDULE FOR YOU, SIR. WE START AT 4 A.M. WITH AN UNHINGED TWEET, FOLLOWED BY YELLING AT THE TV UNTIL NOON. AT 1 YOU HAVE THE SYCOPHANT'S LUNCH, THEN MORE CABLE NEWS FLAGELLATION UNTIL BEDTIME OR THE APOCALYPSE, WHICHEVER COMES FIRST."

FRANCE - EUROPE

2 Ministers Allied With Emmanuel Macron Resign in France

Aurelien Breeden and Benoît Morenne

PARIS — Two centrist allies of President Emmanuel Macron of France left the government on Wednesday, clouded by allegations that their party had misused European Union funds.

The resignations of the two officials — François Bayrou, the justice minister, and Marielle de Sarnez, the minister for European affairs — cast a shadow over what was supposed to be a minor cabinet shuffle later on Wednesday. A day earlier, Sylvie Goulard, the defense minister, announced that she would step down.

Mr. Macron's prime minister, Édouard Philippe, announced the formation of a new cabinet on Wednesday, after legislative elections on Sunday that gave Mr. Macron and his centrist allies a decisive majority in the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament. Florence Parly, a senior executive at the French national railway company and a former Socialist junior budget minister, replaced Ms. Goulard as defense minister. Nicole Belloubet, a member of the constitutional council, took over for Mr. Bayrou as justice minister, and Nathalie Loiseau, the director of the École Nationale d'Administration, an elite school that trains top public servants, replaced Ms. de Sarnez as the minister for European affairs.

Although the resignations will not hamper Mr. Macron's ability to govern, they may undermine the president's vow to transform French politics, which was meant to signal an intention to break from ethical scandals of the past.

Mr. Bayrou and Ms. de Sarnez are cornerstones of MoDem, or Democratic Movement, a centrist party led by Mr. Bayrou that aligned with Mr. Macron during the presidential campaign. Ms. Goulard was elected to the European Parliament with MoDem in 2009 and 2014, but she has recently distanced herself from the party. Mr. Macron's party, République en Marche, and MoDem won 350 of 577 seats in the elections for the National Assembly, securing a strong mandate to enact the president's planned government overhaul.

Because his party won more than 289 seats, an absolute majority, Mr. Macron will not depend on his centrist allies for votes.

MoDem has been accused of using European Union funds to pay aides who were actually doing work for the party. In 2009, six of its members were elected or re-elected to the European Parliament, including Ms. de Sarnez and Ms. Goulard.

Mr. Bayrou and other members of MoDem have denied any wrongdoing. At a news conference on Wednesday, Mr. Bayrou said the party's parliamentary aides had never had "phony jobs," describing himself as the "real target of these denunciations."

"I won't accept being forced to remain silent when the honor of those I represent is at stake," Mr. Bayrou said, arguing that as justice minister he could not talk freely enough to defend himself and his party.

Mr. Bayrou reaffirmed his support for Mr. Macron, calling his election a "chance for Europe and for the world's balance," and said that MoDem would be a "pillar" of the presidential majority in Parliament. Two other members of MoDem were named as ministers in the new cabinet.

Mr. Macron, who was elected on May 7, promised to run an honest and transparent government. Mr. Bayrou had made ambitious ethics changes a condition to his alliance with Mr. Macron, and he had recently been in charge of writing a sweeping ethics bill.

Georges Fenech, a top official with the center-right Republican Party, now the main opposition group in the National Assembly, said in a statement that the resignations showed that Mr. Macron had "played for time" and had "fooled the electorate" by waiting until after the elections to let the ministers go.

Mr. Bayrou's integrity and that of his party allies came under fire last month, after a member of the far-right party National Front sent a letter to prosecutors hinting that parliamentary aides of MoDem lawmakers at the European Parliament had actually been working for their party. Prosecutors opened an investigation on June 9. The National Front is under investigation over similar allegations. According to the newspaper Libération, as many as 11 MoDem employees were being paid with European funds as local aides to the party's European lawmakers.

Mr. Bayrou was also criticized for calling the head of the investigative team at a French radio station to complain about its work on MoDem. He said he was acting as a "citizen" exercising his right to criticize the news media, but many critics said they found the move inappropriate.

Emmanuel Macron Is Facing the 'Mother of All Battles'

George Ross

France is currently marveling at the successes of President Emmanuel Macron. So it should. Relatively unknown not long ago, Macron's centrist presidential campaign took off like wildfire, and shortly thereafter his brand-new "Republic on the Move" party dominated parliamentary elections. But the country would be wise to reserve judgment: Nobody yet knows whether Macron's political virtuosity in elections will be transferrable to policymaking — and his next battle promises to be his most difficult to date.

At the center of Macron's agenda is a vow to immediately focus on reforming France's labor laws, not just to revitalize France but the listless European Union as well. He will no doubt seek to rally his voters behind him, but the depth of their commitment will be tested. Some of the country's militant, risk-taking labor unions — which have managed to stymie major attempts at labor law reform in the past — may be bracing for a fight.

France's labor laws were written mainly in the years of postwar reconstruction and rapid industrial growth and reflect both the country's deep statism and firm beliefs that the age of manufacturing would be permanent. Their regulations touch on almost every aspect of French working life, from collective bargaining to working conditions and hours to vacations, contracts, and grievance procedures to which institutions can represent workers. They have fit less well in the post-industrial era. As long-term, well-protected jobs have declined and less secure service jobs have expanded, the labor market has become segmented between a diminishing number of workers with stable contracts and an expanding group in more precarious situations, a trend accentuated by lower growth and higher unemployment. Union membership has declined from nearly 30 percent of the workforce in the 1970s to 11 percent today — and much of that is concentrated in the public sector. Strikes, for which France was once notorious, have declined in parallel.

The labor code still stands, however, despite multiple efforts by Macron's predecessors to reform it — a testament to the fact that, when they want to, French unions can still strike with paralyzing effect. Macron learned this during the most recent attempt at major labor reforms in 2015-2016, when he was finance minister under the François Hollande presidency, in which ambitious proposals were watered-down versions because of union mobilization.

Macron now seeks to bring France closer to a Scandinavian-style system of "flexi-security." This will eventually include helping those out of work to transition between jobs less painfully through revamped unemployment insurance plans and more effective worker training programs: a gradual shift toward protecting workers rather than protecting jobs. But his initial measures are aimed at giving companies more flexibility in dealing with employees. Tough requirements for dismissing workers will be streamlined by capping severance costs and lightening legal procedures. Working-time regulations will be loosened, allowing much more flexible scheduling, albeit without completely abandoning France's present 35-hour workweek. In theory, such

changes, by making it easier to fire workers and to adjust their schedules to fit business needs, will also make it easier to hire them. The multiple institutions that currently represent workers — on shop floors, in labor tribunals, and in social programs — are also to be consolidated, probably into one. Most controversially, collective bargaining will be decentralized from the sectoral to firm level. These measures, depending upon their details, could weaken existing union confederations; they are unlikely to surrender gently. Also at play are the deep divisions and rivalries within French organized labor, which, historically, have tended to push some unions toward great militancy to gain the upper hand in the competition for members, funding, and bargaining power.

Chronic divisions among the major French union confederations have been around as long as French capitalism. During earlier postwar decades, the pro-communist CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) dominated but had to compete with the stodgy social Catholic CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens) and the anti-communist FO (Force Ouvrière). Each had its particular strongholds, but their rivalries were deeply motivated by Cold War politics: The CGT, a descendant of earlier anarcho-syndicalist movements, tended to pull out all the militant stops against anything it saw as pro-American. The FO, nurtured by American unions and intelligence services, resisted the CGT almost no matter what it did, while the CFTC drew its support from practicing Catholics and anti-communist, anti-class conflict church doctrine. These dynamics have shifted over the years: The CGT has remained rebellious, but its main rival is now the energetic, reformist CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), which split from the CFTC in the mid-1960s; the FO, meanwhile, has slowly abandoned its visceral anti-communism.

Still, over the decades these divisions have fed patterns of conflict, in which unions often targeted their rivals as energetically as they did employers or the state.

And in these interunion fights, the CGT's aggressive militancy has proved an especially rewarding tactic; it tends to spark conflicts that other confederations, in turn, feel obliged to join.

And in these interunion fights, the CGT's aggressive militancy has proved an especially rewarding tactic; it tends to spark conflicts that other confederations, in turn, feel obliged to join. In the past, the CGT initiated crippling strikes in the public sector — on Parisian public transport and the railroads in particular — which have helped block change and, in some cases, had lasting political consequences. The strikes of 1995, in particular, stand out. After new President Jacques Chirac's first prime minister, Alain Juppé, proposed sweeping changes to public pensions and the co-managed organization of other social policies, CGT troops shut down Paris and much of the rest of the country for several weeks. Juppé's reforms were defeated, and Chirac's party was crushed in legislative elections two years later; the 2015-2016 clashes were less spectacular but played out similarly.

Macron knows that this history could threaten his reform plans. To make it difficult for unions to protest, he has thus decided to reform by decrees (though the specific new rules will still eventually have to be approved by Parliament before they become law). Further, he wants to move immediately, to place unions at a disadvantage. Not much but vacationing happens over summer in France, and the French do not take kindly to strikes disrupting their holidays. Macron's goal is to complete the reforms by the time citizens have resumed their post-vacation routines in late September. The procedure requires that France's "social partners" — unions and employers — be "consulted," so 48 consultation sessions have been scheduled until July 21. In these talks, Macron hopes further to divide the unions by seducing the more compliant CFDT, now slightly larger than the CGT, to cooperate in exchange for some influence over the reforms' contents. The CFDT has already announced conditional willingness to accept decentralized bargaining but opposes new legal limits on penalties for abusive firing.

CGT and FO union leaders, by contrast, have made their skepticism clear during these initial consultations, though they have been at pains to maintain a respectful and polite tone with a popular president at the height of his post-victory honeymoon. The CGT's tough general secretary, Philippe Martinez, has announced that "weakening the rights and protection of wage earners is … the equivalent of authorizing social dumping." The FO leader has added that "social policies should not be adjustment variables tied to economic dogma." Both are contemplating opposition but haven't committed yet. What follows will depend on the reforms' final details and on whether in a pro-Macron political climate they risk alienating too many citizens by mounting all-out resistance.

But should the CGT decide to pull the trigger, it could push for public sector strikes, particularly in transportation, to try to bring France to a halt. It can anticipate at least some public support for this. France remains France: The country's militant, left-leaning, and protest-prone subculture still exists, ready to be stimulated by labor action. La France Insoumise (France Unbowed), a coalition of radical left-wing groups led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who won just under 20 percent in the first round of the presidential election — about the same number that the now-eclipsed French Communist Party won in the 1970s — did reasonably well in the parliamentary vote and has talked of new resistance.

The stakes of this effort to change labor law are high, not just for France but for Europe as a whole. Reforming the country's labor code is necessary, according to the new president, for new economic flexibility, greater economic growth, lower unemployment, and increased competitiveness. But it might be even more necessary for re-energizing the EU, Macron's other urgent goal. Macron hopes to restore the Franco-German "engine" to soften Germany's overdriven devotion to austerity, its opposition to a more federal eurozone "economic government" with a budget, finance minister, and parliament, and its rejection of new forms of European financial solidarity. But for France to re-establish its EU influence, Angela Merkel's Germany will first have to be persuaded that Macron can succeed at his domestic reforms. Merkel and her team have long seen France as an ineffective, debt-prone, and politically and economically stalemated neighbor. Macron sees labor reform as a large first step toward changing this perception. On its cover, the French weekly *Le Point* recently worried that Macron's initiatives could provoke "the mother of all battles" and that Macron might be "betting his presidential term." But labor reform is at the very center of his plans, and he can hardly back off now.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

French Justice Minister François Bayrou Quits Government

William Horobin

PARIS—Emmanuel Macron revamped his government, sidelining centrist allies buffeted by an expenses probe that contrasts with the new French president's push for probity.

Mr. Macron made the most senior change on Wednesday, replacing justice minister François Bayrou, the founder and leader of the centrist party Mouvement Démocrate, known as MoDem. Defense minister Sylvie Goulard and European affairs minister Marielle de Sarnez —both members of MoDem—were also left out of the new government.

The ministers said they chose to leave after French prosecutors on June 9 launched a preliminary probe into allegations MoDem lawmakers at the European Parliament wrongfully used European funds to employ people working for the party as parliamentary assistants.

MoDem has denied any wrongdoing.

Mr. Bayrou's departure deprives Mr. Macron of a senior figure of French politics who rallied centrist voters to his successful election campaign.

Mr. Bayrou backed Mr. Macron in February, saluting the presidential candidate's promise to clean up politics after a series of expense scandals dogged rivals in the presidential race.

At the time, Mr. Bayrou's support boosted Mr. Macron's poll numbers, securing his position as front-runner in the presidential election.

After winning the presidential election in May, the backing of MoDem gave Mr. Macron an experienced party apparatus as he scrambled to recruit candidates for legislative elections.

But Mr. Macron's party La République En Marche, made up mainly of political neophytes, defied early expectations by winning an outright majority in the election. With 308 of the 577 seats in the National Assembly after the second and final round of voting Sunday, Mr. Macron doesn't need the support of MoDem, which won 42 seats.

Mr. Bayrou, who as justice minister was preparing a new law for the moral improvement of politics, said he chose not to be part of the new government to recover his freedom of speech and better defend his party against the allegations.

"I am choosing to not expose the government and the president to a deceitful campaign," Mr. Bayrou said.

Mr. Macron replaced the departing MoDem ministers with more technocratic, less political castings. Nicole Belloubet, a member of France's constitutional council was appointed justice minister and Nathalie Loiseau, director of France's elite training school École nationale d'administration, became European affairs minister.

In a nod to moderate leftists who backed his campaign, Mr. Macron picked Florence Parly—a budget minister in the Socialist government of Lionel Jospin —as defense minister.

Some analysts say that by sidelining MoDem from his government, Mr. Macron is showing a tough approach to political scandals that strengthens his position as he prepares a contentious new labor law.

"The departure of Francois Bayrou will eliminate a potential element of discord in the cabinet and strengthen the president's hold on his government," said Antonio Barroso, analyst at political risk consultancy Teneo Intelligence.

Mr. Bayrou said that MoDem will still be part of Mr. Macron's majority in parliament. Two members of his party were handed junior posts in the new government.

"We and I stand by the president of the Republic, to help and support him," Mr. Bayrou said.

Mr. Macron's backing in parliament was also strengthened Wednesday when some lawmakers from the main opposition party Les Républicains split off into a separate group with another centrist party. The block says it will be "constructive" by supporting Mr. Macron's government on key texts.

Lawmakers will finally draw lines in the sand July 4 when the National Assembly holds a vote of confidence in Mr. Macron's government.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

At Paris Air Show, GE Takes Role of American Upstart

Daniel Michaels and Robert Wall

LE BOURGET, France—One of the biggest European players at this year's Paris Air Show isn't a European company at all. It's General Electric Co. GE -1.24%

Over the past decade, the U.S. industrial icon has bought a number of aerospace companies and suppliers from Britain and Sweden to Italy and the Czech Republic. The deals have made GE parts ubiquitous on modern jetliners. It has grown into one of Europe's largest aerospace employers, with roughly 11,600 workers across the continent, setting it apart from many of its peers.

European deals are familiar turf for John Flannery, who last week was named GE's new chief executive officer starting in August. He made his mark at the company leading GE's biggest industrial acquisition ever, the $17 billion purchase of France's Alstom SA power business.

GE is now trying to turn its collection of disparate European aerospace assets into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It wants to knit the businesses into a pan-European group that can develop new equipment and tap European Union development funding.

"We pick the best companies at the time wherever they are globally," David Joyce, GE vice chairman and boss of the aviation business said. "As long as it makes sense we buy them."

Rivals are watching with interest. Eric Schulz, president for civil aerospace at Britain's Rolls-Royce Holdings PLC, said "GE's size has always been and I believe will always be a threat for Rolls-Royce and for the others, including their own customers." The British aircraft-engine maker is GE's biggest rival in powering the largest jetliners.

But Mr. Schulz said size has drawbacks, making companies less flexible as they try to protect broader corporate interest and, as a result, fail to offer the most competitive product. Being leaner "I hope gives us more creativity and innovation," Mr. Schulz said. Rolls also is investing, including in the U.S., he said.

GE executives in Europe say that getting employees from a variety of companies and countries to learn the conglomerate's ways and to cooperate can be difficult, but their engineering talent benefits the group.

GE's recent European spree is built on deep links. In 1941, GE built the U.S.'s first jet engine based on a British design. In 1974, it teamed up with a French rival, which was building engines for the supersonic Concorde, and today their CFM International joint venture is the world's biggest producer of jet engines. In 2007, GE bought U.K. airplane-electronics maker Smiths Aerospace, expanding its aviation business beyond engines and landing gear.

The company's massive plane-leasing business, GE Capital Aviation Services, known as GECAS, largely operates from Ireland and London. It has a fleet of about 1,700 planes with more than 200 customers. GECAS placed deals to buy 100 Airbus aircraft and another 20 from Boeing on the first day of the Paris Air Show unfolding outside the French capital this week.

When GE decided to expand into the civilian turboprop market, long dominated by U.S. rival Pratt & Whitney, a unit of United Technologies Corp. , it bought Prague-based Walter Aircraft Engines in 2008.

In 2013, GE snapped up Avio Aero, an important supplier near Milan whose private-equity owner was looking to exit. The company makes vital engines components for jets, turboprops and helicopters.

Last year, GE acquired 3-D printing companies in Germany and Sweden that are important suppliers to Avio, Walter and GE's engine division in the U.S. Mr. Joyce said that when GE wanted to grow its 3-D activities, it had to strike deals in Europe because that is where the expertise resided.

Last week, on the day GE named Mr. Flannery its new boss, it also said it had bought OC Robotics of Bristol, England, for an undisclosed sum. The company's snake-arm robots should make repairs in difficult to reach places on wings easier.

GE's European empire "is something that came together almost accidentally," said Riccardo Procacci, a GE veteran who moved to Avio from its Italian oil-and-gas business. "Stepping back now, we can see we are one of the biggest aviation companies in Europe."

For GE, "a strong presence in Europe brings a different perspective on the world," said Mr. Procacci.

Being based in Europe allows companies to sell locally developed high-tech components like engine combustors that in the U.S. face export restrictions due to national-security concerns, he said.

GE's newly grown European roots give it access to national technology funding it couldn't otherwise tap. In Italy, it has built a network of ties to universities and small business that benefit from government support.

And the various acquisitions bring GE a new continent of expertise it can draw from. When GE explored the best way to create a new turboprop engines, its experts in Prague and the U.S. looked at what other units, including Avio, could offer. "We said, this is going to be a European engine," said Brad Mottier, a vice president at GE Aviation.

The engine is now in development at GE locations across Europe.

The New York Times

Brussels Train Station Bombing Renews Focus on Belgium as Jihadist Base

Milan Schreuer and Dan Bilefsky

BRUSSELS — Four times this month, proclaimed followers of the Islamic State have sowed fear in major European cities — in London; twice in Paris; and, on Tuesday night, in Brussels.

The extremist group has taken responsibility for only one of the attacks — a murderous rampage in London on June 3 — but Belgian officials on Wednesday said that a failed bombing at Central Station on Tuesday night underscored the continuing security threat in Europe, as the Islamic State is under siege in Iraq and Syria.

The 36-year-old suspect — identified only as Oussama Z. — entered the station at 8:39 p.m. on Tuesday, went downstairs from the main ticket hall and began shouting near a group of passengers, according to Eric Van der Sijpt, a spokesman for the federal prosecutor's office.

The suspect was carrying a suitcase bomb that contained nails and gas bottles, Mr. Van der Sijpt said, and set off a partial and relatively harmless explosion.

He then left the bag behind while he went in pursuit of a train official, Mr. Van der Sijpt said, and it "exploded a second time, more violently."

After the second explosion, the man went back upstairs, approached a soldier and shouted "God is great" in Arabic. The soldier opened fire, killing him. Initial reports that the man might have been wearing an explosive belt proved to be unfounded. No injuries were reported.

The authorities said that the suspect, a Moroccan citizen, had assembled the bomb at his home in the working-class Molenbeek section of Brussels.

While a more serious attack was averted — the authorities praised the soldier for his quick response — it once again shined a spotlight on Belgium, a country that has been used as a base by many jihadists. Some developed extremist views in Belgium and then went to Syria and Iraq before returning.

Militants based in Brussels have been linked to the deadly attacks in and around Paris in November 2015, and the bombings at Brussels Airport and a subway station in March 2016. More than 160 people died in those attacks, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility.

A number of militants involved in those earlier attacks had roots in Morocco, including Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a ringleader of the Paris attacks; the brothers Salah and Ibrahim Abdeslam, who were among the Paris attackers; Mohamed Abrini, who accompanied two suicide bombers in the airport attack; Najim Laachraoui, a bomb maker who blew himself up at the airport; and the brothers Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui, who died in the Brussels bombings. Salah Abdeslam and Mr. Abrini are being held while awaiting trial.

In addition, two of the three men who carried out the attack on and around London Bridge in June were Moroccan.

About 100,000 people with Moroccan citizenship live in Belgium, which has a population of 11 million. Moroccan-Belgians are the country's largest minority group with roots outside the European Union.

Many Moroccan men were recruited in the 1960s to work in Belgium's mines and factories on temporary contracts but stayed on, eventually joined by their families. Many then became Belgian citizens, and it is their children or grandchildren — albeit only a tiny fraction of the population — who have sometimes been drawn to jihadist ideology.

Often, according to experts who have studied the phenomenon, future militants start with petty crime and then search for an identity as a way to frame their illicit activity, or to atone for past misdeeds.

Islamic State supporters come from many backgrounds: The man who attacked police officers outside Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on June 6 was an Algerian, and the man who rammed into a police convoy on the Champs-Élysées on Monday was a French citizen.

Oussama Z., born in 1981, had lived for several years in Molenbeek, which was also the home of some of those connected to other attacks in the city and in Paris.

"He probably made the bomb there," the prosecutor's office said after Oussama Z.'s home was raided, giving no specific information about the explosive used, other than saying that "chemical substances and materials" were found that could have been used in bomb making.

The authorities said the man was known to police for sexual misconduct but not for terrorism.

The failed attack on Tuesday occurred on the eve of a summit meeting in Brussels at which European leaders, including Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Emmanuel Macron of France, were to discuss military and security issues, among other topics.

Jan Jambon, the Belgian interior minister, said in an interview with VRT News on Wednesday that several homes had been raided overnight.

"The modus operandi of I.S. keeps changing," he said of the Islamic State. "It's a game of the poacher and the forest ranger — whenever the forest ranger approaches, the poacher goes elsewhere and finds new ways."

While he added that it was essential to be vigilant in the face of security threats, he warned against an overreaction. "If you protect yourself everywhere against anything, in the end we will end up in a police state," he said.

After a national security council meeting, the Belgian prime minister, Charles Michel, said that although there was no indication that another attack was imminent, security would nonetheless be intensified.

Central Station was temporarily closed, but it reopened Wednesday morning, as did the nearby Grand Place, an imposing square and tourist destination that had been partly evacuated after the attack

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Suspect in Brussels Attack Had Sympathy for Islamic State

Valentina Pop and Julian E. Barnes

BRUSSELS—Belgian authorities said Wednesday that a 36-year-old Moroccan man shot dead by a soldier in a Brussels train station tried to use a homemade, nail-packed bomb and had sympathy for Islamic State.

Prosecutors said the suspect in the attack, which caused no casualties, had no previously known links to terrorism and had acted alone. They said chemicals and materials found at his apartment suggested he made the bomb.

The prosecutors said they had indications the suspect had sympathy for Islamic State, but provided no further details.

An official briefed on the investigation identified the suspect as Oussama Zariouh. Other officials, who identified him officially only as O.Z., said he had lived in the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek since 2013 and had been investigated for drug-related crimes.

However, officials said that while the man wasn't considered high-risk by Belgian authorities, he had communicated with other self-radicalized individuals. Those contacts weren't with people considered dangerous terror suspects, said one official, although U.S. and Belgian intelligence agencies are investigating whether he communicated with other, higher-ranking terror suspects.

Eric Van Der Sypt, a spokesman for the prosecutors, declined to comment on any ties to a broader network.

The Brussels attack, by a suspect without previously known ties to extremist groups acting alone and targeting a public space near a tourist area, had echoes of other recent terror attacks in Europe.

Islamic State, U.S. and European officials said, has been emphasizing for the past year and a half that radical jihadists in Europe shouldn't come to the Middle East to fight, but should instead remain at home and carry out attacks.

Offering new details of the Tuesday night attack, officials said the man entered Brussels Central Station at 8:39 p.m. and approached a group of passengers before grabbing his suitcase, shouting and causing a small explosion.

No one was hurt in the initial blast, but the suitcase caught fire. The man then fled, leaving the suitcase, and ran downstairs, prosecutors said

The abandoned bag exploded in what prosecutors described as a second, more violent blast. The man returned to the hall where the explosion occurred, rushing a soldier and shouted "Allahu akbar," Arabic for God is great. The soldier fired several times, killing the suspect, prosecutors said. His body then lay there for hours as the Belgian military bomb squad examined the scene for undetonated explosives.

"It's clear he wanted to do more damage than he did. He tried to set off the luggage, which exploded a second time, so it could have been much worse," said Mr. Van Der Sypt.

The man lived in Molenbeek, the Brussels neighborhood that authorities have said is where a number of terrorists connected to the Paris and Belgium attacks were based. Police raided the man's home last night, officials said, and other searches were conducted in Molenbeek on Wednesday.

Police conducting the raid on Zariouh's apartment in a small redbrick townhouse carted away a laptop, a phone, a tablet computer and hard drive, witnesses and officials said. Officials briefed on the investigation said such electronic devices could provide more clues about his contacts before the attack.

U.S. officials said they have offered assistance, as is standard practice, in analyzing any electronic devices recovered in the investigation.

Several of the apartments in the building were raided, a bomb squad was on site and police took in at least one resident in for questioning, who was released later.

Mustafa Er, spokesman for Molenbeek town hall said the suspect was self-employed and had come to Belgium in 2002 and lived in other towns before moving to Molenbeek. Neighbors said they didn't see much of Zariouh.

"He…had a petty criminal past in connection to drugs," said Annalisa Gadaleta, a local councilor in Molenbeek, who added that the

community was now awaiting the result of the investigation and whether Zariouh had connections to other groups.

Ms. Gadaleta highlighted the difficulty of tracking people who self radicalize and aren't known to authorities.

More than 100 radicalized suspects listed by national authorities live in Molenbeek, although Zariouh wasn't on that list, said Ms. Gadaleta. Such lists are shared with local authorities.

Ms. Gadaleta said the neighborhood had received reinforcements, with 50 extra policemen since 2015, but that this was insufficient for the scale of the problem. She said 100 more police officer posts are still to be filled.

In the wake of the attack, Interior Minister Jan Jambon praised security forces and said Belgium's decision to keep its soldiers on street patrols and guarding sites such as the Brussels Central Station had been the right one.

"It's unfortunate you need certain things, like what happened last night, to prove that certain decisions are the good ones," Mr. Jambon said.

In a separate interview on RTL radio he said "the services and the military reacted in a very alert way—we have no victims, no wounded, so that shows the security system worked."

The Washington Post

Attempted Brussels attack 'could have been far worse,' Belgian prime minister says

BRUSSELS — An attempted terrorist bombing at a central Brussels train station "could have been far worse," Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel said Wednesday, hours after a nail-packed bomb failed to fully detonate in the crowded rail hub.

Prosecutor Eric Van der Sypt said the attacker in Tuesday night's incident was a 36-year-old Moroccan who lived in Brussels. The man, identified only by his initials, O.Z., was known to police but had no previously discovered terrorist ties, the prosecutor said.

Authorities who searched his house Wednesday said they found materials that could be used to make bombs and suggestions that he had sympathies for the Islamic State.

He was shot dead after he shouted "Allahu akbar!" — Arabic for "God is great" — and tried to attack a soldier in the station, Van der Sypt said. No one else was hurt.

"We have avoided an attack that could have been far worse," Michel told reporters after convening his security advisers, calling on Belgians "not to let ourselves be intimidated."

The attacker first attempted to detonate his bag, setting off a "partial explosion" as he ran toward a group of people in the mezzanine level of the station that descends to the tracks, Van der Sypt said.

The bag caught fire, and the attacker dropped it and ran toward the tracks. Then the bag exploded "more violently," Van der Sypt said, but it still failed to fully ignite the canisters of gas that were contained within. Nails were also packed into the bag, he said. The attacker was not wearing an explosives-laden belt, Van der Sypt said, contrary to an initial eyewitness account from a railway official.

The attacker lived in the Brussels area of Molenbeek, which was also home to several of the men involved in the November 2015 attack in Paris that killed 130 people and the March 2016 attack in Brussels that claimed 32 victims at the Brussels airport and a subway station.

After Wednesday searches of the attacker's residence in Molenbeek, the prosecutor's office said that "he probably made the bomb there."

The big stories and commentary shaping the day.

The attempted attack came on a continent that has been hit repeatedly by terrorism in recent weeks. Just Monday, there was a failed car attack on the Champs-Elysees in Paris. Earlier this month, there was an attack in London.

But Belgian authorities left their national terrorism threat level unchanged, indicating they do not believe another attack is imminent.

Public transportation was reopened Wednesday morning. And a concert by Coldplay expected to draw large crowds Wednesday evening was to be supplemented with extra security.

Elsewhere in Europe, there was ongoing concern about Islamic State threats. Spain's Interior Ministry said Wednesday that authorities detained a suspected member of the Islamic State and two other Moroccan citizens. The suspect possessed manuals about suicide attacks and is believed to have been in contact with members of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the ministry said in a statement.

The Washington Post

Theresa May pledges 'consensus' on Britain's E.U. withdrawal

By Karla Adam

LONDON — British Prime Minister Theresa May pledged Wednesday to build a widespread "consensus" on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union even as her election-weakened government was locked in talks to keep its hold on power.

"My government's priority is to secure the best possible deal as the country leaves the European Union," said a statement from May's government that was read by Queen Elizabeth II as she formally opened a new session of Parliament.

The government, May wrote in the statement, is committed to working with lawmakers, regional officials and others "to build the widest possible consensus" on Brexit after the difficult divorce talks with the European Union opened Monday in Brussels.

The opening of Parliament — known as the Queen's Speech — was delayed for nearly a week amid the political turmoil set in motion by national elections June 8 called by May.

She had hoped to consolidate power ahead of high-wire Brexit negotiations expected to last two years. But the gamble backfired. Her Conservative Party lost its majority and is now forced to negotiate with a small, right-wing Northern Irish party to ensure the government has majority support in the House of Commons on key issues.

[Brexit talks begin with British bargaining stance still cloudy]

The Queen's Speech was dominated by Brexit-related legislation and covered a two-year period instead of the usual one, highlighting the significance of Brexit.

But there was also much absent. Following the bungled election, May watered down pledges outlined in her party's election manifesto relating to schools, social care and energy.

There was also no mention of President Trump's planned state visit to Britain later this year, even though the address typically mentions upcoming state visits.

But Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said it wasn't included in the speech because a date for the visit has not been fixed.

"The visit will go ahead, believe you me," Johnson told Sky News.

Shortly before the event, Buckingham Palace announced that the queen's husband, Prince Philip, 96, was admitted to a hospital Tuesday evening as a "precautionary measure."

The Duke of Edinburgh would normally have been expected to be at the queen's side during the occasion, but a palace spokeswoman insisted that he was in "good spirits" and was "up and about."

May's Conservative Party, which has 317 seats in the 650-seat Parliament, is trying to strike a deal with Northern Ireland's far-right Democratic Unionist Party. The Conservative Party needs the support of the DUP's 10 members to pass key legislation through Parliament.

[How a right-wing party from Northern Ireland became May's lifeline]

The Queen's Speech will be debated over the next few days before it's put to a vote, expected June 29.

After several tragedies in Britain — four terrorist attacks in three months and a devastating fire in west London — protesters took to the streets of London for a "Day of Rage."

"The more I think about it, the more I get upset," 20-year-old Nafissa Boucetta said, referring to the Grenfell Tower fire that claimed the lives of at least 79 people. Holding aloft a placard that said "Justice for Grenfell," she added: "I think the government has been lying to us about the number of people who

died. I think it's a whole big coverup."

In remarks Wednesday, May said that the initial support on the ground following last week's massive blaze was "not good enough."

"As prime minister, I apologize for that failure," she said.

Despite the botched election and calls for her resignation, May has stayed on as prime minister, although many commentators don't think she will last the full parliamentary term.

"The election result was not the one I hoped for," May said ahead of the Queen's Speech. "But this government will respond with humility and resolve to the message the electorate sent."

As she left Downing Street on her way to Westminster, a reporter yelled out to her, "Your first and last Queen's Speech, prime minister?"

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

This year's state opening of Parliament was unusually low-key because the snap election meant there wasn't time to prepare for a major event.

It's normally the height of pomp and pageantry, but this year there was no gold carriage, no royal procession, no ceremonial robes.

Instead, the queen wore a blue dress and hat with flowers that had a yellow center. Some social media users said her hat bore a striking resemblance to the flag of the European Union.

Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's chief Brexit negotiator, tweeted a picture of the queen delivering the address. "Clearly the EU still inspires some in the UK," he wrote.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Queen Lays Out U.K.'s Brexit, Counterterrorism Plans in Low-Key Speech

Jenny Gross

LONDON—Britain's Queen Elizabeth II on Wednesday unveiled the Conservative government's legislative agenda in a speech that confirmed Britain's negotiating aim in Brexit talks and set out the government's intention to come up with a new counterterrorism strategy after a spate of recent attacks.

In a ceremony marking the official reopening of Parliament after the election earlier this month, the queen read out a list of bills that Prime Minister Theresa May hopes to pass in the two years to come, ranging from plans to improve data protection in the wake of a recent cyberattack on the National Health Service to an outline of major bills related to Britain's exit from the European Union, set for March 2019.

Whether Mrs. May can pass the bills through Parliament is another story: Her poor electoral performance has diminished her authority in the legislature. Having fallen short of a majority, her Conservative Party will require support from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party to pass legislation. After days of discussion the two parties haven't reached an agreement, but talks are continuing.

Mrs. May said earlier that while the election result wasn't one she had hoped for, she would respond with "humility and resolve" to the message the electorate sent her government.

"We will work hard every day to gain the trust and confidence of the British people, making their priorities our priorities," Mrs. May said.

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, speaking in Parliament, called the Conservatives' agenda thin and disappointing.

"This is a government without a majority, without a mandate, without a serious legislative program, led by a prime minister who has lost her political authority and is struggling to stitch together a deal to stay in office," Mr. Corbyn said. "We will use every opportunity to vote down government policies that failed to win public support and we will use every opportunity to win support for our program."

To continue as prime minister, Mrs. May will need a majority of Parliament's 650 lawmakers to approve the agenda laid out in the Queen's Speech. Parliament is expected to give Mrs. May only a narrow win in a vote next Thursday, suggesting she will likely face difficulties ahead in running a minority government, which are rarities in the U.K. and have tended to be short-lived.

To stay in power, Mrs. May's government will have to rely on cooperation from other parties to pass legislation. Without official support from the DUP, this is unlikely to work in the long term, particularly at a moment of historic change for a country deeply divided over what its new relationship with the EU should look like. Mrs. May can remain prime minister until she loses a confidence motion or a major finance vote in the House of Commons, with the first test coming with next Thursday's vote.

Wednesday's ceremony had less pomp than usual. The need for hasty arrangements for opening Parliament after the snap election, along with the queen's lavish birthday celebration just days ago, led Buckingham Palace to tone down arrangements. For the first time since March 1974—the last time a minority government took office in Britain—the queen traveled to Parliament in a car rather than in a royal carriage; she wore a day dress, rather than traditional formal robes, and her crown was beside her on a table rather than on her head. The procession around the queen, as she arrived from the palace, was also smaller.

The queen, whose address was written by Mrs. May's team, confirmed the government's plans to convert EU legislation into U.K. law to smooth the transition out of the bloc. The government also plans to implement legislation to establish new national policies on areas including immigration.

The government also said the U.K. would put in place a legislative framework to allow it to operate its own independent trade policy, a signal the government intends not to be subject to the common external tariffs of the EU's customs union. The bill would bring EU nationals living in the U.K. into Britain's immigration system, the government said, so their rights would no longer be determined by EU law.

As part of the effort to reassert control, the U.K. said it would set its own quotas for fishing and take on the management of its waters. As Britain negotiates its exit with its EU counterparts, the two sides will have to navigate a host of tricky and potentially thorny areas, from fishing to banking regulations to pensions.

The negotiations, which kicked off earlier this week, come at a difficult time for Britain amid a series of tragedies.

A fire at a West London public-housing building earlier this month, in which more than 79 people were killed, has prompted outrage toward the government and angry questions about why fire-safety regulations appear not to have been properly enforced. London and Manchester have also been struck by four terror attacks in recent months, prompting the government to announce review of its counterextremism strategy.

As part of the review, the government will assess the length of prison sentences for terror offenses and consider whether the police and security services have sufficient powers. It said it would work with tech companies to restrict the availability of extremist content online.

The speech omitted several policies the party campaigned on, including a key pledge to cut annual migration to tens of thousands from the current level of about 250,000.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

German Exports to Asia Surge, Calming Nerves Over Protectionist Backlash

Nina Adam

FRANKFURT—German exports to Asia are rising strongly this year in a trend that could mitigate the risks to Europe's largest economy should U.S. President Donald Trump make good on his protectionist promises.

Figures released on Wednesday showed Germany's exports to China rising around 12% in the first four months of the year compared with the same period in 2016. Exports to India rose by a similar rate, while shipments to Indonesia and Vietnam jumped more than 20% each from January to April 2016, according to the Federal Statistical Office.

"We are benefiting from our excellent positioning in East Asia and strong demand for consumer

electronics," said Robert Saller, a managing director at DELO, a family-run producer of special adhesives for electronic devices. China last year became DELO's biggest market, relegating Germany to second place.

German exports to the U.S. and to European Union members are also growing—albeit at slower rates—but the outlook is vulnerable to the threat of rising U.S. protectionism and the U.K.'s exit from the European Union. Economists warn that a U.S.-led shift away from free trade will hurt economic growth and prosperity globally.

Mr. Trump has repeatedly criticized Germany for its large trade surplus with the U.S. and threatened to impose tariffs on German car imports. But action by the U.S. administration has proved modest while German businesses have remained committed to the large U.S. market.

German exports to the U.S. rose 3.9% in the first four months of 2017 from the same period last year. Exports to the U.K. fell by around 4%.

Given increased tensions between Europe and the U.S. over issues such as climate and free trade, European leaders have redoubled efforts to cultivate China. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang met in Berlin earlier this month, and Mr. Li stressed that both parties were "in favor of fostering free trade and the simplification of investment."

German businesses' rising exports to Asia draw on a long record in the region. Economists say that China's One Belt, One Road initiative—-a series of vast infrastructure projects to connect mainland China with the rest of the continent-—will open up more opportunities for trade.

Last year, China became Germany's largest trading partner, with combined imports and exports of almost €200 billion ($223 billion).

Five years from now, the Europe Union's export revenues with Asia will be almost twice its export revenues with the U.S., estimated Charles-Edouard Bouée, chief executive of Roland Berger. "We are very positive on the outlook for Asia," Mr. Bouée said.

The regional shift is already visible in Germany's trade statistics today. New data by the Federal Statistical Office show that German companies exported goods worth €66.9 billion to Asia in the first four months of this year, compared with shipments of €37.4 billion to the U.S.

German companies' reputation for quality engineering and a mix of specialized goods, including capital goods used to build factories and infrastructure, have long been a vital ingredient in the country's export prowess.

Germany is the third largest exporter in the world after China and the U.S. and exposed to a variety of regions, which has helped the country's exporters weather economic shocks in specific markets in the past.

INTERNATIONAL

The Washington Post

Islamic State blows up mosque in Mosul

IRBIL, IRAQ — For more than 800 years, the minaret of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri has punctuated the skyline of Mosul, calling worshipers to prayer.

Its notable lean earned it the nickname al-Hadba, or "the hunchback," and a special place in the hearts of residents.

But the Mosul icon was reduced to rubble Wednesday, the latest casualty in the war to wrest the city from Islamic State militants.

The militants blew up the mosque and its minaret as Iraqi forces came within about 50 yards of the building, according to Iraq's joint operations command, which published a video that appeared to back up its claim, showing a blast emanating from the complex.

The Islamic State's Amaq News Agency contended that the mosque was destroyed in a U.S. airstrike, which the U.S.-led coalition denied.

"This is a crime against the people of Mosul and all of Iraq," Maj. Gen. Joseph Martin, commander of ground forces for the coalition, said in a statement. "The responsibility of this devastation is laid firmly at the doorstep of ISIS."

Over the past eight months, Iraqi security forces have slowly squeezed Islamic State militants into Mosul's historic city center, around a square mile of territory on the banks of the Tigris. The city's most symbolic landmark, the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, was tantalizingly near.

It was in the mosque that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's leader, made his first and only public appearance three years ago, declaring himself "commander of the faithful" and calling on all Muslims to travel to the group's self-declared caliphate.

During their brutal tenure, the group has destroyed churches, Shiite mosques, tombs, shrines and archaeological sites across Iraq and Syria.

Just a month after Baghdadi gave his speech, some Mosul residents said that the militants rigged the 50-yard-high Hadba with explosives as part of their campaign to destroy anything that may be considered idolatrous. It was only said to have been saved by incensed residents who gathered around it to protest.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi described the Islamic State's act of destruction as an "official announcement of their defeat."

Iraqi commanders had said they were planning to attack the mosque compound on Thursday morning.

"It would have been a blow to [ISIS] propaganda if the mosque was recaptured intact," said Hassan Hassan, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Tahrir Institute and co-author of "ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror." "It would have been the most symbolic blow within its most symbolic stronghold."

The mosque was constructed on the orders of Nur al-Din Mahmoud Zangi in 1172. By the time Moroccan scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta visited the mosque in the 14th century, the minaret had already acquired its distinctive lean and nickname.

The intersection of culture and politics.

The cause of its tilt is the stuff of local legend. Some say the minaret bowed in reverence as the prophet Muhammad passed overhead as he ascended to heaven. The city's Christians said it leaned toward the tomb of the Virgin Mary.

But listing 253 centimeters off its perpendicular ax, the precarious minaret has long been a concern.

In June 2014, the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization said that it had begun work with the province's governorate to stabilize and conserve the minaret, which it said was at risk of collapsing. However, just days later, the city was overrun by the Islamic State.

Mustafa Salim contributed to this report.

The New York Times

ISIS Destroys Al Nuri Mosque, Another Loss for Mosul

Falih Hassan and Tim Arango

BAGHDAD — As the bloody battle to retake Mosul from the Islamic State ground on for months, with losses in lives and infrastructure piling up, soldiers and civilians kept in their minds an image of what victory would look like: capturing the historic, and symbolic, Al Nuri Grand Mosque and its distinctive leaning minaret.

It was there, in the summer of 2014, that the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ascended a pulpit and declared a caliphate after his fighters took control of Mosul and swept through other parts of northern Iraq and Syria. It was the last time Mr. Baghdadi was seen in public.

On Wednesday night, with the terrorist group on the cusp of losing control of Mosul and with it its claim to a caliphate straddling the border of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State fighters packed the building with explosives and took it down.

The destruction of the mosque and minaret — which has dominated Mosul's skyline for centuries and is pictured on Iraq's 10,000 dinar bank

note — is another blow to the city's rich cultural heritage and its plethora of ancient sites that have been damaged or destroyed during three years of Islamic State rule.

For residents of Mosul and those who care about Iraq's history, the destruction was yet another painful loss, after so many years of the Islamic State violently erasing a region's history. Before the Islamic State took control of Mosul, Unesco had begun an effort to protect and rehabilitate the minaret, known as Al Hadba, or the hunchback.

"You can find it on money notes, you can find it in scrapbooks," said Rasha Al Aqeedi, who grew up in Mosul and is now a research fellow at the Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. "It's everywhere. I don't know how to put it into words. It's just something people always identified with because it was always there."

Ali al-Nashmi, a prominent Iraqi historian, said, referring to the terrorists: "These dogs, they are the worst of what God has created. I swear to God I cannot imagine Mosul without Al Hadba."

The long campaign for control of Mosul was closing in on the part of the Old City where Al Hadba beckoned, thrusting toward the sky. Capturing the mosque, built by Nur al-Din Mahmoud Zangi, a ruler who in the 12th century unified Arab forces against crusaders from Europe, would have provided an important symbolic moment for the Iraqi security forces, who have taken heavy casualties in day after day of street battles and ambushes by the Islamic State.

"Imagine the Iraqi flag on this mosque, and everyone taking selfies," Ms. Aqeedi said, envisioning what might have been.

Earlier Wednesday evening, Iraqi officers had indicated that on Thursday they planned to begin an assault on the mosque.

Shortly after the Iraqi military issued a statement announcing that the Islamic State had destroyed the mosque, the terrorist group used its news agency to claim that the mosque had actually been destroyed by an American airstrike.

Col. Ryan Dillon, an American military spokesman in Baghdad, said that the coalition had confirmed, through drone surveillance footage, that the mosque had been destroyed. "We don't know how," said Colonel Dillon, who added that the coalition was investigating.

But shortly after, the United States Central Command issued a statement bluntly accusing the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, of destroying the mosque. "As our Iraqi Security Force partners closed in on the Al Nuri mosque, ISIS destroyed one of Mosul and Iraq's great treasures," Maj. Gen. Joseph Martin, the American commander for the operation, said in the statement. "This is a crime against the people of Mosul and all of Iraq, and is an example of why this brutal organization must be annihilated."

In denying the Iraqi forces a moment of victory — many had anticipated that recapturing the mosque would become an iconic visual image of the battle for Mosul — the Islamic State sought to claim a propaganda victory for itself, by blaming the destruction on the coalition.

Many Sunni Arabs in the Middle East, who have suffered under the Islamic State, believe that the terrorist group is a tool of their enemies — Shiite Iran, the West or Israel. And the loss of such a famous mosque is likely to only inflame those conspiracy theories.

"This is my worst fear," Ms. Aqeedi said. "It has strategic implications for the long term, if there's the perception that the west is involved in the destruction."

Many Mosul residents see the Islamic State in such conspiratorial terms. "My message to ISIS, who were sent to erase the history of this city, is I tell them don't be happy about your outrageous action," Ahmed al-Mallah, 45, said. "Mosul people built Al Hadba minaret. And we will build a thousand minarets after kicking out ISIS, who were sent to us to carry out agendas that attempt to eradicate the Sunnis and erase them from this city."

Almost from the beginning of its rule, the Islamic State systematically destroyed or damaged one important monument or shrine after another: the tomb of the biblical prophet Jonah, the Mosul Museum, the ancient city of Nimrud. In Mosul's library, militants burned thousands of old books and manuscripts.

In doing so, the extremist group justified the destruction on religious grounds — that its harsh brand of Islamic law deems such things heretical. But in destroying an important mosque, especially the one in which the group's leader, Mr. Baghdadi, made his famous declaration, the Islamic State simply seemed intent on erasing what was soon, once the city falls, to become a symbol of the failed caliphate.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq called the leveling of the mosque a final act of depravity for the group. It was, he said, the "official announcement of their defeat."

In 2014, after the Islamic State had destroyed many shrines and monuments, residents of Mosul, fearing the minaret might be next, gathered at the site in protest. It was one of the few times that civilians ever confronted Islamic State fighters in the city.

Throughout the territory it controls, the Islamic State has routinely used mosques for battlefield purposes. New York Times reporters have visited mosques whose minarets were used as sniper nests, whose prayer halls were turned into bomb-making factories and whose courtyards were used to store weapons.

For Mosul's people, the erasure of the mosque and minaret from their city's skyline only added to their growing ledger of losses.

"We have lost everything, our money and our things," said Abdullah Ahmed, 33, who fled Mosul and hopes to return soon, after the battles finish. "ISIS destroyed everything. My life, and the life of my family. There is no longer anything important to me."

The Washington Post

U.S. on collision course with Syria and Iran once de facto Islamic State capital falls (UNE)

Trump administration officials, anticipating the defeat of the Islamic State in its de facto Syrian capital of Raqqa, are planning for what they see as the next stage of the war, a complex fight that will bring them into direct conflict with Syrian government and Iranian forces contesting control of a vast desert stretch in the eastern part of the country.

To some extent, that clash has already begun. Unprecedented recent U.S. strikes against regime and Iranian-backed militia forces have been intended as warnings to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Tehran that they will not be allowed to confront or impede the Americans and their local proxy forces.

As regime and militia forces have begun advancing eastward, senior White House officials have been pushing the Pentagon to establish outposts in the desert region. The goal would be to prevent a Syrian or Iranian military presence that would interfere with the U.S. military's ability to break the Islamic State's hold on the Euphrates River valley south of Raqqa and into Iraq — a sparsely populated area where the militants could regroup and continue to plan terrorist operations against the West.

Officials said Syrian government claims on the area would also undermine progress toward a political settlement in the long-separate rebel war against Assad, intended to stabilize the country by limiting his control and eventually driving him from power.

The wisdom and need for such a strategy — effectively inserting the United States in Syria's civil war, after years of trying to stay out of it, and risking direct confrontation with Iran and Russia, Assad's other main backer — has been a subject of intense debate between the White House and the Pentagon.

Some in the Pentagon have resisted the move, amid concern about distractions from the campaign against the Islamic State and whether U.S. troops put in isolated positions in Syria, or those in proximity to Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, could be protected. European allies in the anti-Islamic State coalition have also questioned whether U.S.-trained Syrians, now being recruited and trained to serve as a southern ground-force vanguard, are sufficient in number or capability to succeed.

One White House official, among several who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss Syria planning, dismissed such concerns, saying: "If you're worried that any incident anywhere could cause Iran to take advantage of vulnerable U.S. forces . . . if you don't think America has real interests that are worth fighting for, then fine."

The official said the expanded U.S. role would not require more troops, comparing it to "The Rat Patrol," the 1960s television series about small, allied desert forces deployed against the Germans in northern Africa during World War II.

"With our ability with air power . . . you're not talking about a lot of

requirements to do that," the official said. ". . . You don't need a lot of forces to go out and actually have a presence."

This official and others played down reports of tensions over Syria strategy. "No one disagrees about the strategy or the objectives," said a second White House official. "The question is how best to operationalize it."

The Pentagon, not the White House, made the decision to shoot down Iranian drones and a Syrian fighter jet in response to their approaches to or attacks against U.S. forces and their Syrian allies, this official said. "They shot down an enemy aircraft for the first time in more than a decade. That's accepting a high level of risk," the official said. ". . . We've done quite a lot since April that the previous administration said was impossible without the conflict spiraling."

Ilan Goldenberg, a former senior Pentagon official now in charge of the Center for a New American Security's Middle East program, agreed that the Obama administration "over-agonized" about every decision in Syria.

But Goldenberg faulted the Trump administration with failing to articulate its strategy. "It has been the worst of all worlds," he said. "A vagueness on strategy, but a willingness to deploy force. They are totally muddying the waters, and now you have significant risk of escalation."

"I know the president is fond of secret plans," Goldenberg said. "But this situation requires clarity about our objectives and what we will or won't tolerate."

Trump promised during his campaign to announce within his first month in office a new strategy for defeating the Islamic State. That strategy remains unrevealed, and for several months Trump appeared to be following President Barack Obama's lead in avoiding Assad, Iran and Russia and continuing a punishing assault on Islamic State strongholds elsewhere in Syria, as well as in Iraq.

In April, Trump broke that mold with a cruise missile attack on regime forces after their use of chemical weapons against civilians. Assad and his allies protested but did little else.

More recently, however, there have been direct clashes between the United States and the regime. Trump's campaign calls to join forces with Russia against the Islamic State have largely disappeared amid increased estrangement between Washington and Moscow and investigations of Trump associate's contacts with Russian officials.

Despite U.S. warnings, regime and militia forces have moved toward the Syrian town of Tanf, near the Iraq border, where U.S. advisers are training Syrian proxies to head northeast toward Deir al-Zour, the region's largest city, controlled by the regime and surrounded by the Islamic State. It is a prize that the regime also wants to claim.

At the end of May, Syrian and Iranian-backed forces pushed southward to the Iraq border, between Tanf and Bukamal, where the Euphrates crosses into Iraq. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias have, in small but concerning numbers, left the anti-Islamic State fight and headed closer to the border, near where regime forces were approaching.

On at least three occasions in May and June, U.S. forces have bombed Iranian-supported militia forces approaching the Tanf garrison. Twice this month, they have shot down what they called "pro-regime" armed drones, including one on June 8 that fired on Syrian fighters and their American advisers.

On Sunday, two days before the most recent drone shoot-down near Tanf, a U.S. F/A-18 shot down a Syrian air force jet southwest of Raqqa.

In response, Russia said it would train its powerful antiaircraft defense system in western Syria on farther areas where U.S. aircraft are operating and shut down the communications line that the two militaries have used to avoid each other in the crowded Syrian airspace.

"The only actions we have taken against pro-regime forces in Syria . . . have been in self-defense," Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said this week.

Dunford also made clear that victory against the Islamic State in Raqqa, and in Mosul, where the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces are in the last stages of a months-long offensive, will not mark the end of the war.

"Raqqa is tactical. Mosul is tactical," Dunford said. "We ought not to confuse success in Raqqa and Mosul as something that means it's the end of the fight. I think we should all be braced for a long fight."

In a report Wednesday, the Institute for the Study of War, referring to intelligence and expert sources, said that the Islamic State in Raqqa had already relocated "the majority of its leadership, media, chemical weapons, and external attack cells" south to the town of Mayadin in Deir al-Zour province.

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

Neither the U.S.-led coalition and its local allies nor what the institute called the "Russo-Iranian coalition" can "easily access this terrain — located deep along the Euphrates River Valley — with their current force posture," it said.

At the White House, senior officials involved in Syria policy see what's happening through a lens focused as much on Iran as on the Islamic State. The Iranian goal, said one, "seems to be focused on making that link-up with Iran-friendly forces on the other side of the border, to control lines of communication and try to block us from doing what our commanders and planners have judged all along is necessary to complete the ISIS campaign." ISIS is another name for the Islamic State.

"If it impacts your political outcome, if it further enables Iran to solidify its position as the dominant force in Syria for the long haul," the official said, "that threatens other things," including "the defeat-ISIS strategy" and "the ability to get to political reconciliation efforts."

"For us," the official said, "that's the biggest concern."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Jared Kushner Meets With Netanyahu, Abbas

Rebecca Ballhaus

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior White House adviser, Jared Kushner, met Wednesday with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his senior advisers to try to advance U.S. efforts to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Mr. Kushner, who was joined by Jason Greenblatt, the president's top representative on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and David Friedman, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, discussed with the prime minister "potential next steps" in the effort to establish peace between Israel and the Palestinians, according to a White House statement.

Mr. Kushner and the Israeli officials "underscored that forging peace will take time" and emphasized the "importance of doing everything possible to create an environment conducive to peacemaking," the White House said.

In a televised welcome of Mr. Kushner, Mr. Netanyahu said the meeting was an "opportunity to pursue our common goals of security, prosperity and peace," and added: "Jared, I welcome you here in that spirit."

Mr. Kushner responded: "The president sends his best regards, and it's an honor to be here with you."

Mr. Netanyahu also praised the president's trip to Israel last month, saying Mr. Trump left an "indelible impression on the people of Israel."

Messrs. Kushner and Greenblatt also met Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his senior advisers in the West Bank city of Ramallah. When they return to Washington, they will brief the president, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and national security adviser H.R. McMaster and talk "next steps," the White House said.

The trip marks the White House's first major follow-up to Mr. Trump's trip to the region last month and suggests Mr. Kushner's policy portfolio isn't shrinking despite scrutiny by federal investigators into his past meetings with Russian officials.

Ahead of the trip, a White House official said no major breakthroughs or three-party talks were expected. White House officials have pointed to an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement as a priority for Mr. Trump.

Earlier Wednesday, Mr. Trump spoke by phone with Saudi Arabian Prince Mohammed bin Salman to congratulate him on his elevation to crown prince. During the call, the two leaders discussed how to "achieve a lasting peace" between Israel and the Palestinians.

Jared Kushner arrives in the Middle East

JERUSALEM — President Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, arrived here Wednesday afternoon with an audacious mission: to see if it is possible to restart peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Few voices in Jerusalem or Ramallah sounded very hopeful as the untested Kushner came for preliminary talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

This is the right place for skeptics. But they are hedging their bets. That's mostly because Trump is so out-of-the-ordinary, so grandiose and mercurial, that the players here wonder whether he just might make progress — or, alternatively, make things worse by raising expectations, then abandoning the project in a tweetstorm of frustration and finger-pointing.

Past efforts to broker peace are strewn with failure, overseen by veteran American diplomats with years of experience in the region, who were all sent packing.

Perhaps as a sign of the stakes, Kushner's first meeting after arriving was to offer condolences to the family of an Israeli border police officer, Staff Sgt. Maj. Hadas Malka, 23, who was stabbed to death by a Palestinian assailant in Jerusalem's Old City on Friday.

After a session with Netanyahu, the White House described the meeting as "productive." Israel's Channel 2 reported that it was open-ended and very preliminary, with the Americans offering no proposals or timetables.

No time is the right time for negotiations in a region in turmoil. But now is an especially challenging moment for Trump's inexperienced 36-year-old envoy to give it a try.

[In Israel, Trump urges new Middle East harmony but faces old suspicions]

The Palestinian leadership is weak and fractured. And Israel's coalition government is among the most right-wing in its history, whose members not only oppose a Palestinian state but also want to annex wide swaths of the West Bank for Jewish settlers.

Yet Trump surprised Arabs and Jews with his improbable insistence that "the deal of the century" can be struck.

The president won plaudits from all sides during his whirlwind tour of Saudi Arabia, Israel and the West Bank last month.

"President Trump is at his point of maximum leverage," Daniel Shapiro, the former U.S. ambassador to Israel, said in an interview. "He has gained respect in the region. He is seen as serious. Add to that, his known streak for being unpredictable. This might make it very difficult to say no to him or to a member of his family."

Shapiro cautioned: "This creates an opening. Not more than an opening. One shouldn't be irrationally exuberant. But the opening is real."

As point man, Kushner's inexperience in the Middle East is duly noted but may not be fatal. He is joined on his mission by Trump's special representative for international negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, who was formerly Trump's real estate lawyer.

"It's not necessarily a bad thing to have two people with no experience. Others who have had a lot of experience haven't done so well either. They all failed," said Nathan Thrall, author of the new book "The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine."

Thrall, a Jerusalem-based analyst for the Crisis Group, warned that the advantage of fresh eyes has its limits.

"Both the Israelis and Palestinians are pros at wearing down envoys with endless details," he said. "They've done it to the most experienced negotiators."

Thrall and others said they thought the new effort posed more risks for Netanyahu than Abbas.

When Trump was elected, Netanyahu and his right flank, especially in the settler movement, were overjoyed.

Relations with the Obama White House had sunk to new lows. They were expecting more of the same from Hillary Clinton. But Trump spoke a language Israelis loved, gushing with praise for the Jewish state and playing down long-held U.S. positions that branded settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank as "illegitimate" and "obstacles to peace."

Little by little, Trump has sown doubt on the Israeli right. He surprised his new Israeli fans by warning Netanyahu to slow down on new settlement construction — with unproven results.

Construction began this week on a new settlement deep in the West Bank, on land the Palestinians want for a contiguous state, for Jewish settlers evicted from their homes after it was shown that they built on private Palestinian property.

"After 20 years I have the privilege of being the first prime minister to build a new settlement in Judea and Samaria," Netanyahu wrote Tuesday on Facebook, using the biblical terms for the West Bank. "There never was nor will there be a better government for settlement than our government," he boasted.

Palestinians have remained publicly supportive of Trump's efforts, even though they say they realize Greenblatt and Kushner are unlikely allies. Both men are Orthodox Jews from New York and committed Zionists with histories of supporting Israel.

Kushner and Greenblatt have asked both sides to tell them what they want and where they want to go. The Palestinians say they are ready to present their vision in detail. Standing beside Trump during their meeting in Bethlehem last month, Abbas was specific: He wants a sovereign state created along pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Aides to Abbas said that during his meeting with Trump, the two leaders even examined maps.

"But we are not sure that Netanyahu can or will give the Trump team a bottom line. Can Netanyahu utter the words 'two states?' That is the question," said a Palestinian official preparing for Kushner's trip, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with the news media.

[Trump steps back from U.S. commitment to two-state Israeli-Palestinian solution]

The White House issued a statement before the trip asserting that Trump "strongly believes that peace is possible" and was sending "his most trusted advisers" to spearhead the effort.

The White House cautioned that forging a historic peace agreement will take time.

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Sallai Meridor, a former Israeli ambassador to the United States, said that Trump's approach of bringing Arab leaders from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan into the mix offered renewed incentives.

Meridor said that he was hopeful that the Palestinians would engage with seriousness and that it was in Israel's best interests to seek a deal.

Most Israelis, including Meridor, assume that if Netanyahu begins to engage deeply in talks and makes confidence-building gestures, his governing coalition will break apart and new partners, most likely from the Labor Party, will have to be brought into the government.

As for the White House, "I think the desire is positive. I hope they are coming with elements of seriousness. They will need hope, patience and perseverance," Meridor said. "It will take a lot of time and a willingness to invest plenty, even when the result could be less than what one might expect."

Cook : Kushner's impossible task in the Middle East is the easy part

Steven A. Cook is Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. This article is based on his new book "False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East."

*(CNN)*Jared Kushner's visit to Israel this week reflects an unexpected development in current Middle East politics.

It is not that Kushner's chances for success are greater than those of a long list of special envoys, but rather that of all the problems in the region, it is the almost seven decades-long Arab-Israeli conflict that seems most amenable to US diplomacy.

This is because following what is universally referred to as the "Arab Spring," major countries of the region have been plunged into instability, uncertainty, and violence that is well beyond Washington's capacity to resolve.

For many people across the region, the unfortunate fact is that life is worse than it was before they began pouring into the streets six years ago to demand freedom.

Although support for Tunisia's Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and former Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi

remains, people are for the most part pleased to be rid of them.

Corruption, brutality, and violence marked the decades they were in power. But being happy that these dictators fell does not mean that people are better off.

That is certainly not the case in Libya and two other failing or failed states in the Middle East, Yemen and Syria, where there were also uprisings in 2011. In Libya, not long after the uprising against his father began, Saif al-Islam Gadhafi warned that it would lead to "forty years" of violence.

As the country has fragmented, rival armies, two different governments, and extremists have vied for control. Somewhere between 13,000 and 30,000 Libyans have lost their lives since 2011.

Syria is a vortex of violence. More than 400,000 people have been killed there since March 2011, when protests broke out against the country's president, Bashar al-Assad. In addition to the staggering death toll, about half the population has been displaced in a conflict that now includes Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and US forces as well as a dizzying array of militias and extremist groups, including ISIS.

If not for the Syrian war, the conflict in Yemen

would likely be dominating world headlines. The country's longtime ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was also deposed in 2011, though he was not prepared to give up power so easily. His hand is evident in the current conflict there, which began when Houthi tribesmen drove Saleh's successor out of power.

The fight has cost an estimated 10,000 lives in the region's poorest country, where Yemenis now face starvation and a massive outbreak of cholera.

What about the countries that have not slipped into civil war?

Egypt has had a turbulent six years, with three leadership changes and the development of a violent extremist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula that has spilled over into the country's population centers, often targeting the Christian minority.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has undertaken some important economic reforms and Egypt's macroeconomic indicators are starting to point in the right direction. But average Egyptians are suffering with high inflation, low employment, nonexistent services and little opportunity.

These problems existed during the Mubarak era, too, but there was also a measure of stability that attracted 15 million tourists in 2010, large amounts of foreign direct investment, and a political environment that was more permissive than it is now.

In a speech to the nation the day before he was deposed, Mubarak warned his fellow Egyptians that the uprising against him would, in the end, cause suffering. He was right.

Tunisia is often billed as the one Arab Spring success story, and by all measures it has done better than the other countries that experienced uprisings. The country has a new constitution that establishes clear checks on executive power, has had free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections (though turnout was a problem), and has a strong civic culture that pulled the country back from the edge of violence in the summer of 2013.

At the same time, Tunisia has a weak government, a large bureaucracy that has proven resistant to change, and an economy that has continuously struggled to produce growth, and jobs along with it.

According to the World Bank, Tunisia's real GDP growth rate in 2015 (the last year for which data are available) was 1%, current unemployment rate is 15%, and inflation is at 5%.

All of this represents a significant hardship for average Tunisians, though their economic situation is not all that different from the year prior to the protests that dislodged Ben Ali.

When the uprisings began in late 2010 and early 2011, the romance of the barricades was infectious.

The region that the New York Times once called "Democracy's Desert" seemed to be in bloom, and with it was the widely held expectation that this Arab Spring would produce democracies.

The result turned out to be something considerably different. Like the era before the uprisings, the "new Middle East" is still authoritarian, but it is also unstable. This does not bode well for Arabs, Turks, Europeans and Americans, because the current uncertainty, instability, and, at times, unspeakable violence of the region -- which has occasionally spilled out across continents -- is likely to be the future of the Middle East for the next several years.

The New York Times

Saudi King Rewrites Succession, Replacing Heir With Son, 31

Ben Hubbard

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Even two steps away from the Saudi throne, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the 31-year-old son of the king, had already pushed the titanic state oil company toward a public offering, loosened some social restrictions that rankled young people and waded into a costly war in Yemen with no plans for how to end it.

Now, Prince Mohammed stands to inherit a kingdom he has already shaken, after King Salman of Saudi Arabia named him crown prince on Wednesday. In doing so, the king swept aside his son's older rival, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, 57, upending decades of royal custom and profoundly reordering the kingdom's inner power structure.

The move further empowers a young and ambitious leader while Saudi Arabia, a close American ally, is grappling with huge challenges, including low oil prices and intensifying hostilities both with Iran and in its own circle of Sunni Arab states.

In favoring his son over Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who is respected for his security acumen, the king, who is 81, also marginalized a large cadre of older princes, many with foreign educations and decades of government experience that the younger prince lacks. If Prince Mohammed bin Salman does succeed his father, he could give Saudi Arabia what it has not seen in more than a half-century: a young king with the potential to rule for decades.

Prince Mohammed's swift rise and growing influence had already rankled other princes who accused him of undermining Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. But such complaints are likely to remain private in a ruling family that prizes stability above all else.

"A lot of people are happy that a younger generation is coming to power, but those who are upset are the older generation," who are not used to such dramatic change, said Joseph A. Kechichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, who has extensive contacts inside the family. "Even if people are uncomfortable, at the end of the day this is a monarchical decision, and people will either have to accept the new arrangement or they will essentially have to keep their mouths shut."

The young prince, known as M.B.S., emerged from obscurity after his father ascended to the throne in January 2015. He has since accumulated vast powers, serving as defense minister, overseeing the state oil monopoly, working to overhaul the Saudi economy and building ties with foreign leaders, particularly President Trump.

His supporters praise him as working hard to fulfill a hopeful vision for the kingdom's future, especially for its large population of young people. His critics call him power hungry and fear that his inexperience has embroiled Saudi Arabia in costly problems with no clear exits, like the war in neighboring Yemen.

Since the death of the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz al-Saud, in 1953, control of the absolute monarchy has been passed between his sons, a system that raised questions about the future as the brothers aged and began dying.

After ascending the throne, King Salman addressed the issue by naming Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince, the first time a member of the third generation was put in the line of succession.

Now, the royal reordering has ended the career of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who served as interior minister and was widely respected by Saudis and their foreign allies for dismantling Al Qaeda's networks in the kingdom after a string of deadly bombings a decade ago.

King Salman's decrees on Wednesday removed Prince Mohammed bin Nayef from the line of succession and his post as interior minister, to which he named Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, 33, another young prince with little experience relevant to the ministry's extensive security, law enforcement and intelligence duties.

Another of the king's sons, Prince Khalid bin Salman, was recently named ambassador to the United States. He is believed to be in his late 20s.

Prince Mohammed bin Salman's rise has been meteoric.

Since his father named him deputy crown prince, or second in line to the throne, he has led the development of a plan, Saudi Vision 2030, that seeks to decrease the country's dependence on oil, diversify its economy and loosen some of the conservative, Islamic kingdom's social restrictions.

As defense minister, he had primary responsibility for the kingdom's military intervention in Yemen, where it is leading a coalition of Arab allies in a bombing campaign aimed at pushing Houthi rebels from the capital and restoring the government.

That campaign has made limited progress in more than two years, and human rights groups have accused the Saudis of bombing civilians, destroying the economy of the Arab world's poorest country and exacerbating a humanitarian crisis by imposing air and sea blockades.

Read more — in English and Arabic — from Ben Hubbard and Mark Mazzetti on Prince Mohammed bin Salman's quick rise and his rivalry with his cousin, Mohammed bin Nayef.

Prince Mohammed has taken a hard line on Iran, saying in a television interview last month that dialogue with the country, a Shiite power, was impossible because it sought to take control of the Islamic world.

"We are a primary target for the Iranian regime," he said, accusing Iran of aiming to take over Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and Medina. "We won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we'll work so that the battle is for them in Iran."

Saudi Arabia and Iran stand on opposite sides of conflicts in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen while they seek to lessen each other's influence across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Prince Mohammed has looked for mentorship to Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. The two men have recently worked in tandem to isolate Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism, an accusation their small neighbor denies.

The removal of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who had warm relations with the emir of Qatar and his father, could make it even harder for the tiny nation to reach an accommodation with its neighbors, analysts said. And some wondered whether the young prince's assertiveness would further destabilize the region.

"This is a time when we really need some quiet diplomacy," said Maha Yahya, the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. "We need coolheaded politicians who are able to defuse tensions rather than inflame them. There has been a far more aggressive stance in Saudi foreign policy under King Salman, and now it might get worse."

Prince Mohammed bin Salman faces great economic challenges, with low oil prices continuing to sap the state budget, scarce job opportunities for the kingdom's youth and declining consumer confidence.

Saudi Arabia reported a 4 percent rise in its domestic stock market after the changes were announced. But oil prices continued to fall on Wednesday.

Prince Mohammed's increasing power over the world's largest oil exporter could have far-reaching consequences.

Traditionally, the Saudi royal family largely left the operation of the energy industry to technocrats, but Prince Mohammed has taken a more direct role.

In particular, he has drawn criticism for driving an initial public offering of the state oil giant, Saudi Aramco, a highly secretive company that has underpinned the kingdom's economy and generated tremendous wealth for decades. He has also made pronouncements on oil production policy that sometimes seemed to undercut more experienced Saudi energy officials.

"The problem is that he is unpredictable, and it is not clear who he is relying on for advice," said Paul Stevens, a Middle East oil analyst at Chatham House, a research group based in London.

Prince Mohammed's promotion comes at an awkward time for the Saudi oil industry.

Production cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, largely orchestrated by the Saudis last year, have so far failed to lift prices, presenting the Saudis and other big oil producers with few good options. Major oil exporters could further cut output, or the Saudis could resume a policy they pursued in late 2014: allowing prices to fall, forcing smaller, lower-margin producers out of the market and, as a result, grabbing more market share.

Prince Mohammed has pursued a uniquely public profile for the traditionally private kingdom, giving interviews to Western news organizations and taking high-profile trips to China, Russia and the United States, where he ate with Mr. Trump in March.

Saudi news outlets portrayed the changes in the Saudi hierarchy as an orderly reshuffle, repeatedly broadcasting a video clip of the new crown prince deferentially kissing the hand of his predecessor and saying 31 of 34 members of a council of senior princes had approved the appointment.

The departing prince's profile had waned as that of his younger cousin grew, although he remained popular with the Western officials he cooperated with on security and intelligence matters.

In 2009, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was wounded when a militant set off a bomb hidden in his rectum. People who have met with the prince recently said the injury's effects have lingered, but it was unclear if they had a role in the king's decision to replace him.

The New York Times

Trump's Preferred Candidate Wins Again, This Time in Saudi Arabia

Mark Landler and Mark Mazzetti

WASHINGTON — President Trump wasted no time on Wednesday calling the newly named crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman. Less than 24 hours after King Salman elevated Prince Mohammed, his 31-year-old son, Mr. Trump offered congratulations and celebrated the monarchy's cooperation in rooting out terrorist financing and other issues.

Even more than Karen Handel, the Republican who won a hotly contested House seat in a special election in Georgia this week, Prince Mohammed was Mr. Trump's anointed candidate — in this case, for the byzantine struggle to control the House of Saud.

Mr. Trump views Prince Mohammed as a crucial ally in his effort to cement a Sunni Muslim alliance in the Persian Gulf. The prince, who also serves as the Saudi defense minister, favors a confrontational line toward Iran, which dovetails with the Trump administration's hostile stance toward Tehran. And he is spearheading Saudi Arabia's embargo of neighboring Qatar, which Mr. Trump has praised because he, like the Saudis, accuses the Qataris of financing extremist groups.

The young prince is also a favorite of the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Mr. Kushner began cultivating Prince Mohammed soon after Mr. Trump's election. When the prince visited Washington in March, he dined with Mr. Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump, at their home. When the couple joined Mr. Trump on his visit to Saudi Arabia last month, the prince hosted Mr. Kushner and Ms. Trump for a dinner at his house.

"There's a certain compatibility there," said Jon B. Alterman, the director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "The president and his entourage think fellow billionaires who have an itch to get things done make the world go 'round."

Mr. Kushner and Prince Mohammed, senior officials said, worked closely together to choreograph Mr. Trump's trip to Saudi Arabia, which yielded a renewed commitment by dozens of Arab and Muslim leaders to combat extremism in their countries and to turn off the financial spigot to extremist groups.

For Mr. Trump's aides, that trip ranks as a highlight of his foreign policy so far, and they credit the prince for what one senior official described as under-promising and over-delivering.

Prince Mohammed's elevated status was apparent in the earliest days of the Trump administration. Senior American officials said they wanted the United States to help Saudi Arabia with its campaign in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, in part because the success or failure of the military campaign could affect the prince's fortunes in the kingdom's succession battle.

During the prince's first visit to the White House, in March, the president welcomed him with a meeting in the Oval Office and a formal lunch in the State Dining Room. The next day, Prince Mohammed spent four hours with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis at the Pentagon.

Mr. Kushner also hopes for Prince Mohammed's backing, or at least his blessing, in a peace initiative between Israel and the Palestinians. On Wednesday, Mr. Kushner made his first major foray into the process, meeting in Jerusalem with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and in the West Bank with Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority.

"The United States officials and Israeli leadership underscored that forging peace will take time," White House officials said in a statement. But administration officials said the process would be helped if major Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia, signed on to the concept of an agreement.

Middle East experts said that Prince Mohammed believes Saudi Arabia should have a normal relationship with Israel in the future. But several expressed doubt that the prince would want the Saudis to be an important component of an Israeli-Palestinian negotiation.

While the Trump administration clearly views Prince Mohammed as a reformer — pointing to Vision 2030, his blueprint to modernize Saudi Arabia's economy and society — others warned that the White House could be in for a disappointment. "There are other people who are more circumspect," Mr. Alterman said. "They wonder if he has the right temperament. They wonder if he has the right political skills."

That ambivalence ran through the Obama administration, which was caught off guard by the rapid rise of King Salman's favorite son. Prince Mohammed, unlike other prominent royals, was not educated in the West and had not had a track record of government service, and he was nearly unknown in Washington when he ascended to the position of deputy crown prince in 2015.

He also assumed the title of defense minister and almost immediately became the public face of the kingdom's hastily launched military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. The chaotic early months of the campaign gave him a reputation in some parts of the Obama administration as reckless and hotheaded.

There was also the problem of finding someone in Washington to develop a relationship with the young prince. Prince Mohammed's natural counterpart on the American side, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter, had little inclination to spend time nurturing ties to the prince.

Secretary of State John Kerry assumed that mantle, inviting Prince Mohammed to his Georgetown home for an iftar dinner and meeting with the prince in May 2016 on the Serene, a luxury yacht that the prince bought from a Russian billionaire.

Still, there were issues that could never be bridged. A particular point of friction was the Obama administration's attempts at rapprochement with Iran.

At a meeting in Turkey in November 2015 between President Barack Obama and King Salman, the prince leapt into what American officials said was a lecture on what he saw as the administration's failures in the Middle East.

There are no such differences with the Trump administration, however. Saudi officials have lavished praise on Mr. Trump for his bombing of Syria and his hawkish stance toward Iran.

The Trump administration also seems to have had little concern about showing favoritism in the rivalry between the prince and Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who until Wednesday had been next in line to the Saudi throne.

Prince Mohammed bin Nayef had close ties to national security officials in the Obama administration. But the political change in the United States this year brought a reversal of fortune for Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who lost many of his contacts.

The March visit to the White House by Prince Mohammed bin Salman so angered Prince Mohammed bin Nayef that he made his annoyance known to the American government using unofficial channels.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Change in the House of Saud

Saudi Arabia has resisted modernity since its founding in 1932. But the political sands are shifting, and the change will accelerate with Wednesday's appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince.

King Salman broke with decades of tradition with his royal decree that ousted his nephew, security czar Mohammed bin Nayef, in favor of Salman's son, Mohammed bin Salman. The Saudi crown has typically passed from one octogenarian or septuagenarian brother to another, so the rise of the 31-year-old son as heir designate is a monumental development.

This is all the more remarkable given the young leader's reformist inclinations. The Saudis face a triple challenge in falling oil prices, a youth demographic bulge and Iranian imperialism. The Crown Prince believes the answer is an assertive foreign policy that unites Sunni Arab states against Tehran, combined with domestic reform that weans the Kingdom off oil.

This regional vision took shape soon after King Salman ascended the throne in 2015. As Defense Minister (a portfolio he will retain), the Crown Prince emerged as the architect of the Saudi-led military campaign to oust the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels from Yemen.

The Yemen operation has been long and hard, but it has largely succeeded in cutting off Iranian supplies to the Houthis and boosted the confidence of Arab states. Mohammed bin Salman has also spearheaded efforts to diplomatically isolate Qatar over its two-faced policy of cooperating with the West while funding Islamist groups like Hamas.

Last year the Crown Prince launched Vision 2030, a reform program to diversify the Saudi economy and expand the role of private enterprise. The heart of the plan is to boost the private share of the economy to 65% by 2030 from about 40%, and reduce the government's dependence on oil for revenues, now at 70%.

That's a tall order in a Kingdom that has historically offered its citizens oil-funded, cradle-to-grave welfare in exchange for little say in politics. Many Saudis have grown up to expect high-paying government jobs that are increasingly hard to subsidize with oil at under $50 a barrel. Unleashing the private economy will also require liberating Saudi women to enter the work force—the right to drive would be a start—and that has already triggered clashes with the Wahhabi clerical establishment.

Earlier this year the government was forced to reverse a pay cut for state employees. Yet Mohammed bin Salman has made progress in other areas. A plan to offer public shares in the state-run oil company, Aramco, is moving ahead. Concerts are performed and movie theaters are opening for the first time in the Kingdom, allowing young Saudis access to entertainment and social interaction that their peers nearly everywhere else take for granted.

His appointment as Crown Prince will strengthen his hand by putting to rest competing claims to the throne from more conservative corners of the House of Saud with its 7,000 princes. A moderate and prosperous Saudi Arabia would bolster stability across the Arab world and is squarely in the U.S. national interest. Washington should support and encourage the young prince as he pursues change.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Karen Elliott House: This Is Not Your Father's Saudi Arabia

Karen Elliott House

The appointment of Mohammad bin Salman, 31, as Saudi Arabia's next king will accelerate his radical reform and further solidify the U.S.-Saudi partnership. King Salman's long-anticipated decision to name his son crown prince almost certainly is intended to present a unified face to the kingdom's adversaries, especially Iran—and to bolster U.S. support for a more assertive Riyadh.

The royal decree removing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, 57, was said to be supported by 31 of the 34 members of the Kingdom's Allegiance Council, surviving sons and grandsons of Saudi Arabia's founder. The old crown prince immediately pledged his loyalty to the new one, who knelt in front of his cousin in a public show of respect.

This announcement concludes a long struggle within the ruling family. Many royals had opposed Mohammad bin Salman precisely because they feared his father, now 81, intended to establish his own lineal monarchy at the expense of other family branches. The king won their support by amending the law of succession so that after the last of the founder's sons is king—that will almost certainly be Salman—the king and crown prince can't be from the same branch.

The new crown prince had assiduously wooed President Trump to counterbalance support for Mohammed bin Nayef among the U.S. defense and intelligence establishments. Mr. Trump's strong support of Riyadh during his recent visit, coupled with growing Saudi-Iran tensions, seems to have moved King Salman to act. The new crown prince may be clearing the way for action against Qatar, which he has accused of supporting Iran and regional terrorist groups.

Because Mohammed bin Salman has already been setting policy almost single-handedly, his elevation isn't likely to lead to any sharp changes at home, where he is pressing an ambitious agenda to wean the Kingdom off declining oil revenues and create a private-sector led economy. His reform plan, known as Vision 2030, is revolutionary. Out with government dependence; in with self-reliance. Out with antimodernist Wahhabi dogma and in with moderation. "Our vision is a strong, thriving and stable Saudi Arabia . . . with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method," he said in unveiling the plan a year ago.

Even though the promised reforms have barely begun, they have sparked strong opposition as Saudi citizens feel the pocketbook impact of reduced subsidies for energy, water and electricity. Economic growth has nearly stopped as government cuts spending to ease huge budget deficits. The impact is particularly large because 80% of Saudi household income comes from government, which employs 6 in 10 Saudi workers.

All this has led many Saudis to take a wait-and-see attitude toward reform. Many assumed that should King Salman die and Mohammed bin Nayef accede, the new king would fire his young cousin. That uncertainty is gone. Mohammed bin Salman may even be able to persuade his father to step aside, so as to guarantee the crown prince's accession. Power dies with a monarch, so the royal family could band together at Salman's death to deny his son the throne.

With the succession settled, Saudi citizens are more likely to buckle down and accept painful change. The U.S. should welcome this clarity and do all it can to support reform inside Saudi Arabia as the best way to enhance both stability and human rights. The Trump administration also should welcome the prospect of working with a Saudi leader who seems to have bet his role in the royal family on partnership with the U.S. and assertive opposition to Iran.

Now both countries need a workable strategy to confront Tehran, which is gaining power in the region at the expense of both Riyadh and Washington. Saudi Arabia under Mohammed bin Salman has gone on the offense at home and in the region after generations of cautious defense. It's one thing to go from defense to offense, far harder actually to score.

Ms. House, a former publisher of The Wall Street Journal, is the author of "On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—and Future" (Knopf, 2012).

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Saudi Shake-Up Has One Goal: Drag the Country Into Modern Era (UNE)

Summer Said in Dubai, Justin Scheck in Riyadh and Michael Amon in London

When Salman bin Abdulaziz became Saudi Arabia's king two years ago, the country's leadership appeared little different from how it had been for decades. The ruler and his designated successor were two of the country founder's dozens of sons, a fractious fraternity that passed along power in an unbroken chain of conservative rule.

No longer. Modernity has walloped Saudi Arabia, one of the world's most ossified societies, and today it is struggling to maintain the economic and political power it built on giant crude-oil reserves.

On Wednesday, King Salman, 81, named his ambitious and confrontational 31-year-old son Mohammed bin Salman as his crown prince and successor, in a bid to supercharge an attempt by the country—and the monarchy—to secure its future. The move caps an overhaul rare in Saudi history that has deposed two crown princes and marks the ascent of the youngest ruling generation the kingdom has seen.

The young prince is leading what amounts to a national turnaround effort, and his rapid ascent emphasizes the critical nature of that job.

Low oil prices and mounting demographic pressures are tearing at the kingdom's fragile social contract, making change even more urgent and political unity at the top a greater priority. Mohammed bin Salman is spearheading a plan to take the state oil company public in 2018 in what could be the world's biggest public offering and to invest proceeds in a fund to diversify the country's economy.

The change of power has profound implications for Saudi Arabia's political and economic future, for global oil markets and for allies inside and outside the Middle East. It casts into retirement the erstwhile crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, King Salman's nephew and a longtime antiterror official who had close ties with U.S. diplomats. It empowers a largely untested prince who may become even more powerful than his father, as dissenting factions have been edged out and power is now consolidated in King Salman's line.

"There hasn't been such a powerful central player since King Abdulaziz," said Steffen Hertog, a London School of Economics professor who studies Saudi Arabian politics. King Abdulaziz, the father of King Salman, founded the kingdom.

The Saudi royal family is increasingly squeezed by perceived threats in the Middle East, most of all the rise of its rival Iran after the end of Western sanctions linked to its nuclear program. Mohammed bin Salman is leading a costly war against Iranian-supported rebels in Yemen who toppled a Saudi-backed government and has inserted Saudi Arabia into the Syrian civil war, backing opponents of Iranian ally President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia has led a jarring diplomatic freeze-out of its onetime ally Qatar, over the tiny emirate's budding ties to Iran.

The young prince's overtaking of his older cousin has long been viewed as inevitable in some royal circles, according to people familiar with the matter. The timing of the move was cemented by the need to unify the kingdom's leaders behind the economic overhaul and foreign-policy moves, according to one of the people.

"It is a highly calculated move to make Saudi Arabia as stable as possible," the person said. "You need this clarity when you have a big ambitious reform plan you want to achieve."

One catalyst for the timing of Wednesday's shuffle: Mohammed bin Nayef's stance on Qatar. According to two people familiar with the matter, he wanted to resolve the dispute through diplomatic channels, while Mohammed bin Salman wanted to take a harsher stance. Mohammed bin Salman won the argument, and, on June 5, Saudi Arabia announced an economic blockade of Qatar.

The succession overhaul that was announced by royal decree—hours after the dawn meal that precedes the daily fast in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan—was expected by some, but the timing may have been accelerated by the Qatar issue, according to one of the people familiar with the matter.

In the aftermath of the dispute between Mohammed bin Salman and his cousin, Saudi Arabia's Allegiance Council, which comprises 34 members of the royal family representing each lineage of Abdulaziz's sons, met in Mecca this week, said a person familiar with the matter. The council advises the king on matters of succession, but its decisions aren't binding. Its vote in favor of the leadership shuffle, however, showed there is a consensus within the family about Mohammed bin Salman's promotion.

Indicating a belief that urgent action was necessary, 31 members voted to oust the crown prince and promote Mohammed bin Salman, this person said.

In Washington, a senior administration official said the Trump administration knew the change was likely but didn't know this move would happen today. "Why now? What's behind it? Nobody knows," this person said.

Promoting a prince with a more aggressive line on foreign disputes is a change for the country. Its neighbors now see it taking "a much more assertive, insistent domineering" approach to foreign policy, said Chas Freeman, who served as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia under President George H.W. Bush. "Some of the neighbors regard it as a drive for Saudi hegemony in the region," he said.

The new heir apparent is likely to become the youngest ruler of Saudi Arabia since King Abdulaziz. He has taken a truculent approach to dealing with regional rivalries. In private meetings, he reminds visitors that his nation spends some $60 billion a year on weapons, giving him the "upper hand" over surrounding nations.

Mohammed bin Salman will face economic changes that have gained urgency with the oil-price rout. A drop to less than $45 a barrel, down over 60% since 2014, has ushered in a destabilizing period of austerity measures in a kingdom where oil money provided almost 80% of government revenue and underpinned a cozy lifestyle for the Saudi middle class.

The kingdom has a growing population of young people who

can't find good jobs, with an unemployment rate over 28% in 2016 for people aged between 20 and 29.

Domestically, Mohammed bin Salman has significant support within the swelling ranks of young, foreign-educated Saudis who want more economic opportunity and fewer social restrictions. Since the kingdom's founding, the royal family's alliance with religious hard-liners has kept in place severe strictures. Women aren't allowed to drive and must get permission from relatives to travel abroad or marry.

Many young people want to lift such barriers, and Mohammed bin Salman has said he wants to increase the number of women in the workplace. In a country where 45% of the population of 32 million is under 25, that may be a key to economic growth.

"Mohammed bin Salman needs young people to help him succeed—and young people need him," said Ahmed Al-Ibrahim, 40, a Saudi business consultant. "He is ambitious, he has a vision and he delivers. He will push for the separation of mosque and politics."

Last year, the monarchy stripped the country's religious police of its powers to arrest and instructed its members to behave kindly toward suspected offenders. In a country where cinemas are banned, there is now a government body with the task of promoting entertainment. Government officials often hint the country's ban on women's driving will soon be lifted.

Before his father became king in January of 2015, Mohammed bin Salman had a relatively low profile in Saudi Arabia. But he had spent years at his father's side while the future king held a series of government positions.

Tall, youthful and bearish, Mohammed bin Salman punctuates his enthusiastic discourses on politics and power with a tic in which he extends his neck and lifts his chin.

Since rising in power, he has driven his underlings hard. "It's always 'right now,' " when he's pushing an initiative, said one high-ranking official. The prince has demanded the IPO of Saudi Arabian Oil Co., or Saudi Aramco, happen quickly, said people familiar with the matter, and in the view of some officials, he rushed some economic reforms, leading to backlash among citizens.

After Salman became king in 2015 upon the death of his older brother Abdullah, another brother, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, was appointed crown prince. Mohammed bin Salman was appointed defense minister and chairman of the country's Council for Economic and Development Affairs, putting him at the head of military and economic matters. The king's young son monopolized the limelight, becoming the face of the kingdom's ambitious economic overhauls and its war to oust Iranian proxies from Yemen.

Crown prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz resigned in April 2015, making room for Mohammed bin Nayef, a nephew of King Salman's, to become crown prince, and Mohammed bin Salman to become deputy crown prince. That structure was a major shift, as for the first time it named a successor to the throne who would be of the younger generation. It was also the first time a sitting crown prince had been replaced.

But Mohammed bin Nayef was also quickly eclipsed by the young Mohammed bin Salman, who announced an economic-overhaul plan called Vision 2030 in 2016. To deal with the impact of low oil prices on the kingdom's finances, he announced new austerity measures including cuts to public-employee salaries and reduced energy and water subsidies. The cuts were made even more necessary by the expensive war in Yemen against Houthi rebels.

As his cousin's public profile rose, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef spent a long stretch of 2016 on vacation in remote Algeria, and, until September of last year, kept a relatively low profile even when in Riyadh, reinforcing the view that his power was waning.

Mohammed bin Salman's profile meanwhile continued to rise. In January 2016, he announced he planned to take a minority stake in Saudi Aramco public. That plan raised concerns among some within the company about losing control of the source of most of Saudi Arabia's income.

Consumers also griped about some of the subsidy cuts, and business owners had problems with overhaul measures including some designed to increase Saudi employment. Early this year, the prince met with 10 business leaders who complained that few Saudi companies grew last year, while many lost money.

Private sector growth was sluggish, they said, and suffered from declining purchasing power of consumers. They said rising fuel costs—the result of subsidy cuts—were hurting them, according to a meeting document the Journal reviewed.

Mohammed bin Salman also ran into political challenges with austerity measures aimed at curbing government spending. Late last year, he instituted cuts to government employees' allowances and bonuses. They proved unpopular, and in April King Salman reversed them as part of a series of decrees that also put two of his other sons in elevated positions, including U.S. ambassador.

Known to be intrigued by Wall Street and eager to do deals abroad, he faces the challenge of pulling off the IPO of Saudi Aramco, a complex deal that he has said could value the company at $2 trillion—although inside the company, some officials said that is likely to be less than $1.5 trillion. Mohammed bin Salman has cultivated relationships with bankers and international business figures, seeking advice on how to bring investment into Saudi Arabia and looking for ways to invest the country's money in industries other than oil.

The demands of the prince's new job stand in stark contrast to the traditional court process that put him in the role. At their Mecca meeting, all but three of the members of the Allegiance Council endorsed the shuffle, according to one official familiar with the vote.

In a ceremony broadcast on Saudi television, Mohammed bin Nayef formally acceded to his younger cousin, saying, "I pledge allegiance to you. I am content."

And he told his cousin, "God help you. Now I will rest, and you, God help you."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Prince's Elevation Means a More Activist Saudi Arabia

Yaroslav Trofimov

Brace for more turbulence. The dynastic struggle in Saudi Arabia is over, and power—for all practical purposes—is now in the hands of a young generation of princes determined to show the Middle East who's the boss.

Mohammed bin Salman, appointed on Wednesday as the kingdom's crown prince and designated successor to his 81-year-old father, King Salman, is the face of bold changes launched by once staid Saudi Arabia in the past two years.

At just 31 years of age, he is the architect of the bloody war in Yemen, the initiator of painful economic overhauls, the instigator of moves to aggressively counter Iran and, more recently, the catalyst of a Saudi-led regional campaign to isolate tiny Qatar.

His 57-year-old cousin, the now-removed crown prince and interior minister, Mohammed bin Nayef, was widely seen as the voice of caution and experience in the kingdom's halls of power—and a possible check on some of Mohammed bin Salman's rasher moves.

Now that he is gone (and replaced at the interior ministry by a 33-year-old nephew of Mohammed bin Nayef), Saudi Arabia's regional posture is likely to become even more adventurous.

"Mohammed bin Salman is much more willing to use Saudi hyper-nationalism as a way to solidify domestic social change," said Andrew Bowen, a specialist on the kingdom at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. "It's a risk when you put a very headstrong, stubborn, impulsive, more nationalist leader in that position compared to Mohammed bin Nayef, who was slow, deliberate and pragmatic."

While Mohammed bin Nayef didn't publicly criticize his young rival, he supported a more traditional Saudi approach of acting behind the scenes and building regional consensus—including in relations with Qatar and Iran.

Mohammed bin Salman—who has developed close ties with the activist de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed — has by contrast advocated showcasing the kingdom's military and financial might.

"Now you are going to see more decisiveness, be it in the war in Yemen or in the recent disturbance of relations with Qatar. The Saudi foreign policy is going to be more open and more dynamic," predicted Ahmad al-Ibrahim, a Saudi political commentator and businessman.

Mohammed bin Nayef, of course, exercised only limited authority outside his internal-security turf in recent months. This means that—despite the consolidation of power in Riyadh—the change in the kingdom's behavior may be less dramatic than many expect, cautioned Saudi analyst Mohammed

Alyahya, a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council.

“In terms of foreign policy, economic policy and defense, I don’t foresee a seismic shift because Mohammed bin Salman has already been in charge of these files for quite some time,” Mr. Alyahya said.

Indeed, over the past several months, as Mohammed bin Salman widened his authority with the appointment of young princes to key levers of government (including a younger brother as ambassador to Washington), it increasingly seemed just a matter of time before Mohammed bin Nayef was forced out.

Yet few expected this time to be so short: As the consensus among Western diplomats in Riyadh went, Mohammed bin Salman needed to show some actual achievements before making the move.

With the war in Yemen bogged down, Qatar refusing to capitulate and the House of Saud forced to roll back unpopular austerity measures in April, the only such success has been Mohammed bin Salman’s ability to develop an unexpectedly warm relationship with President Donald Trump, who repeatedly bashed the kingdom during last year’s campaign.

The prince visited the White House in March, paving the way for last month’s high-pomp Riyadh summit at which Mr. Trump seemed to endorse Saudi claims to lead the entire Muslim world. Shortly thereafter, Saudi Arabia and its allies moved against Qatar—securing, at least at first, Mr. Trump’s backing.

On Tuesday, however—just hours before the Saudi leadership shake-up—the U.S. State Department issued an unusually strong rebuke of the Saudi and Emirati embargo on Qatar, which houses a major U.S. military base in the region. To many in the Middle East, this was a signal that Saudi leaders may have been overconfident in their dealings with Washington, too.

“I do not see so far that the Trump administration has given the Saudis a blank check,” said Riad Kahwaji, CEO of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Dubai. “It is too early to talk of this as an achievement because we are yet to see what the Trump administration will actually give to the Saudis in the near future.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Qatar’s Rivals Draw Up Demands as U.S. Urges Action to Settle Feud

Felicia Schwartz

WASHINGTON–U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, pressing for a diplomatic resolution to a feud among Washington’s Arab allies, said Wednesday that Saudi Arabia and other countries have compiled a list of demands for Qatar, and urged that talks move ahead.

The Saudis, acting with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and others have blockaded Qatar for the past two weeks, closing borders and canceling airline flights while accusing Doha of supporting extremist movements and cultivating ties to Iran.

On Tuesday, Mr. Tillerson’s spokeswoman Heather Nauert criticized those aligned against Qatar, saying the blockade appeared to be motivated more by long-simmering regional grievances than specific allegations about terrorism.

Mr. Tillerson on Wednesday urged Qatar’s adversaries to now present Doha with the list of demands.

“In regards to the continuing dispute within the GCC, we understand a list of demands has been prepared and coordinated by the Saudis, Emiratis, Egyptians, and Bahrainis,” Mr. Tillerson said. “We hope the list of demands will soon be presented to Qatar and will be reasonable and actionable.”

Mr. Tillerson said the U.S. supports efforts by Kuwait to mediate the conflict and looks “forward to this matter moving toward a resolution.”

He met with Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir Monday in Washington.

The Trump administration has sent conflicting messages on the dispute, with President Donald Trump at time joining in the finger-pointing against Qatar while at other times joining Mr. Tillerson in appealing for a diplomatic resolution.

Mr. Trump spoke with Saudi Arabia’s new Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on Wednesday, according to the White House. They discussed “the priority of cutting off all support for terrorists and extremists, as well as how to resolve the ongoing dispute with Qatar,” the White House said.

Bloomberg

Eli Lake : How Trump's Afghan Policy Is Different From Obama's

A new approach would aim to empower the government without telegraphing a withdrawal date for U.S. troops.

Every disclosure about the Trump administration's forthcoming Afghanistan strategy triggers a chorus like a Passover seder: Why is this strategy different from all other strategies?

The goal is the same. Like President Barack Obama's initial Afghanistan surge, the objective for Trump's strategy is to force the Taliban into peace talks and to push for a negotiated settlement to the conflict on terms favorable to the elected government.

The means are essentially the same. Like Obama in setting his second-term policy, President Donald Trump has signaled he does not want to send a large force to take back the country, province by province.

The bright line is the same. Like most American politicians since George W. Bush, Trump does not want to get sucked into a money pit of even more nation building.

But there are important differences. This week, a senior administration official working on the strategy explained some of them and made the case that this time the Afghanistan strategy has a chance for success where others failed.

One stark difference is that, according to this official, Trump has no intention of "telegraphing" an American troop withdrawal. Obama took the opposite approach on the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, making it known to friend and foe that 2010 was the end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq and that all U.S. troops were supposed to be out of Afghanistan by 2016.

For years, the Taliban concluded they could wait out the Americans, a perception bolstered by Obama's insistence on setting withdrawal dates. Trump's advisers also say Obama's approach shaped the calculations of other regional actors who would fill in the void left by a premature U.S. exist, like Pakistan, Russia and Iran.

This is one reason the Afghanistan strategy is now officially known inside the National Security Council as the South Asia strategy. It will take a regional approach to the thorny problems of America's longest war.

The senior administration official told me this means there will be strong efforts to blunt the influence of both Russia and Iran. That's important because U.S. generals have recently accused the Russians of arming the Taliban. The Iranians, who in the beginning of the war were courted by the George W. Bush administration as a partner to stabilize Afghanistan, are now perceived to be spoilers.

The regional approach also extends to Pakistan. Like Obama, the Trump administration is looking to target the Haqqani network of former military and intelligence officers who provide support from Pakistan to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The hope, according to the senior administration official, is to "convince Pakistan that their security interests are better served by cooperating rather than working against the U.S. in Afghanistan."

Finally, the regional approach will build on Obama-era efforts to work more closely with India, and encourage the Indians to continue providing financial aid to Kabul to build more infrastructure.

The new approach would also change how the war in Afghanistan is managed. Military commanders under Obama complained that the White House at times micromanaged the war. U.S. officers training Afghan soldiers were limited in how much they could support the units they trained when going into battle. Because there were strict caps, known as "force management levels," placed on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the U.S. often had to hire outside contractors to perform routine maintenance on equipment instead of keeping whole units and battalions intact.

Last week, Trump finally agreed to lift the force management levels for Afghanistan and empower Secretary of Defense James Mattis to make decisions on the numbers of U.S. troops sent there. That new authority will also empower U.S. commanders on the ground to engage more in the fight with the local forces U.S. officers are training. Finally, the Pentagon will

be sending in more close air support and artillery to assist the Afghan military.

As I reported, since April Trump had resisted giving the Pentagon this authority, but ultimately he relented. The senior administration official told me the president's decision was a response to the spiraling situation on the ground. On May 31, terrorists managed to get a truck bomb inside Kabul's diplomatic quarter, killing 150 people. It was the deadliest bombing to hit Kabul since the beginning of the war in 2001, and it marked a direct threat to the elected government of President Ashraf Ghani.

The Kabul bombing and a more recent attack on U.S. soldiers from Taliban operatives who infiltrated the Afghan army forced Trump to make an uncomfortable choice. On the one hand, the president has been wary of a large conventional surge in Afghanistan, fearing, according to some administration officials, that this could become his Vietnam War. On the other hand, he does not want to be the president who lost Afghanistan. Had he not empowered the Pentagon to lift the force management levels, his top advisers argued the Ghani government could fall.

All of that said, Trump's decision to lift the cap on U.S. forces for Afghanistan is not a blank check. The senior administration official told me it was highly unlikely the total U.S. troop levels for the country would exceed the "low five figures." What's more, other U.S. officials tell me that Trump has left open the option of changing course if he doesn't see real progress on the ground.

That flexibility will work for and against U.S. interests. On the one hand, Trump will resist getting U.S. forces into another quagmire. At the same time, a key pillar of the current strategy is to persuade all players in Afghanistan that the U.S. is committed to the government in Kabul for the long term.

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This tension is one of the reasons Trump has yet to approve a strategy for Afghanistan and the region, despite the fact that its broad outlines have been ready for his approval for more than two months. U.S. officials however now tell me he is ready to commit to the plan his top advisers have developed. The biggest hurdle was empowering Mattis to set the troop levels for Afghanistan. Trump is expected to make a decision on the regional strategy sometime next month.

Then the world will begin to see whether Trump's approach is different enough from Obama's to get a different result.

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The New York Times

U.N. Security Council Welcomes Deployment of New Counterterrorism Force in Africa

Somini Sengupta

UNITED NATIONS — A French-American standoff over the vast, dangerous Sahel region of Africa is over: On Wednesday, after weeks of tense negotiations, the Security Council approved a resolution welcoming the deployment of a new multinational military force to fight terrorist groups operating in the area.

France had pushed for the force, from five African countries, to combat terrorism, drug traffickers and people smugglers thriving in the Sahel. The French ambassador to the United Nations, François Delattre, on Wednesday called the resolution of approval a “landmark” that would need the world’s financial support in the coming months.

The United States had objected to giving the force the authority to “use all necessary means,” which is the most robust form of Security Council authorization. The Americans argued that the mandate was too broad and that it was not legally necessary — and in the final text, adopted unanimously, that language was dropped.

The counterterrorism force is to be made up of 5,000 troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

The next French-American diplomatic battle could be over who will finance the mission. For now, the money will not come from the United Nations peacekeeping budget. The United States pays the largest share of that budget, and the administration’s envoy to the United Nations, Nikki R. Haley, is pushing to reduce it.

United Nations peacekeeping forces are already operating in Mali, which has been racked by a domestic ethnic rebellion and by groups linked to Al Qaeda.

Many countries in West and Central Africa are former French colonies, and France has deep economic and security interests in the region.

Both France and the United States maintain a military footprint in the Sahel, where groups linked to Al Qaeda proliferate. The latest terrorist attack came Sunday on a resort near Bamako, the capital of Mali, killing five people.

“We wish to move quickly,” the ambassador of Mali, Issa Konfourou, told the Security Council on Wednesday, “because the terrorist groups will not wait.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Islamic State-Linked Militants Storm New Village in Philippines

Ben Otto

MANILA, Philippines—Militants aligned with Islamic State attacked a village and fought with security forces in the southern Philippines, spreading a bloody conflict about 50 miles south of where government forces have been battling Islamist insurgents for more than a month.

Members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters group attacked a village near the town of Pigcawayan in central Mindanao island at dawn on Wednesday, occupying a school for hours and holding dozens of local civilians hostage while using them as human shields, the military said. Members of the group have been involved in the prolonged battle against government troops to the north.

The gunmen targeted a patrol base of government-sponsored militiamen and held 31 hostages, including 12 children, at a nearby school, military spokesman Brig. Gen. Restituto Padilla said. The militants left the area under the cover of dark, leaving the hostages unharmed, Mr. Padilla said.

Area residents said four of the militants were killed in gunfire exchange with security forces, Mr. Padilla said.

“The school area is again safe. The patrol base is well secured,” Mr. Padilla said. He added that the militants “were taking advantage of the situation that we have a very…lightly defended outpost and that they think our forces are elsewhere in the province. But that’s not the case. Our forces are spread all over.”

Government troops have been battling militants linked to Islamic State in Marawi, a Mindanao city of 200,000, leading President Rodrigo Duterte to place the entire region under martial law last month. More than 300 people have been killed and 180,000 displaced in the fighting, and the military estimates around 500 civilians remain trapped.

Militants have been seeking to establish a caliphate in the predominantly Muslim southern Philippines.

In recent days, authorities have said a small number of fighters in Marawi have escaped the city, fueling concern that the conflict could spread to other areas. Authorities also fear that with the end of the Muslim fasting month next week, reinforcements could join the fighting, including from foreign shores. The government has said militants in Marawi include citizens from Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and other countries.

The Bureau of Immigration on Wednesday moved to tighten borders, ordering more stringent screening of foreigners arriving at airports across the country and seaports in the south. Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente said in a statement that visitors having “questionable documents or doubtful purposes” should be “booked on the first available flight to their port of origin.”

Mr. Duterte on Tuesday raised the specter of a wider conflict in Mindanao should the island’s Christians take a stand against the militants.

“If civilians start to take up arms, it will be a civil war,” he said while visiting soldiers in Cagayan de Oro, a coastal city in northern Mindanao.

“In Mindanao, there are a lot of Christians who also own high-powered guns,” he said. “They have

stockpiles of arms. A communal war will be dangerous for everyone. We have to prevent that."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : The Next Step on North Korea

The horrific death of Otto Warmbier, a 22-year-old student held in a North Korean prison for 17 months, highlights the brutal nature of the rogue regime and underscores the urgency of stopping its nuclear ambitions. The next step should be to sanction the Chinese financiers and traders who sustain Kim Jong Un.

President Trump built up expectations of Chinese help after his April summit with President Xi Jinping. That was a long shot given China's failure to rein in its ally in the past. But it made sense diplomatically, putting Mr. Xi on notice that tougher U.S. action would follow if he failed to deliver. But on Tuesday Mr. Trump tweeted, "While I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!"

As the Journal reported last week, the Administration asked Beijing to crack down on some 10 Chinese companies and individuals that trade with North Korea. If China refuses, the U.S. is prepared to act unilaterally by the end of the summer. The U.S. should now move with dispatch to use tougher sanctions to deprive those on the list from access to the international financial system.

Skeptics are right that United Nations sanctions have done little to stop North Korea, but the sanctions that drove Iran to the negotiating table were far tougher. And a new report from the Washington research group C4ADS suggests that the North's trading network is highly vulnerable to the new sanctions.

The report dispels the misconception that North Korea obtains materials and technology for its weapons through an invisible network that can't be stopped by sanctions. It says the same small number of Chinese individuals and companies that dominate legal trade with the North also supply it with "dual use" goods to build nukes and missiles. As sanctions have tightened, this network has grown smaller and more consolidated. That's because there are only a few individuals who have the skills and connections within China and North Korea to continue trade under these circumstances. Pyongyang will find it hard to replace them.

The U.S. stumbled across this North Korean vulnerability in September 2005 when the U.S. Treasury named Macau's Banco Delta Asia a "primary concern" for North Korean money laundering. The bank was forced to freeze $25 million in North Korean assets, but the knock-on effects were huge. Trade that depended on the bank ground to a halt, and other banks cut their business with North Korea.

In a tragic miscalculation, the Bush Administration released the frozen funds two years later in return for North Korea returning to disarmament talks, which went nowhere. North Korea moved most of its trading network to China, and the Obama Administration let the North Korea problem grow as it focused on other priorities.

North Korea is now a few years away from fielding an intercontinental missile, and U.S. options are dwindling. A pre-emptive military strike is the last resort because the Kim regime could kill millions with conventional and nuclear weapons. But now that Beijing has been given the chance to help and either refused or failed, the U.S. and its allies have to use every sanction and other tool available to prevent the Kim regime from doing to millions what it did to Otto Warmbier.

The Washington Post

Editorial : The Trump administration has expanded sanctions on Russia. Here's what it should target next.

THE TRUMP administration modestly expanded sanctions on Russia Tuesday in an encouraging sign that it will continue to raise the pressure on the regime of Vladimir Putin for its illegal activity in Ukraine. Eleven of the newly penalized individuals and entities operate in the province of Crimea , which Moscow invaded and annexed in 2014; they include the Russia-designated state prosecutor. Yet according to two leading Crimean human rights activists, no one in the occupied province has been explicitly punished for the sweeping violations of human rights that have occurred there since 2014. That should change.

"When it comes to Crimea, no one is talking about human rights," said Tetiana Pechonchyk of the Kiev, Ukraine-based Human Rights Center. One reason for that is that Russia has sealed off the territory from the outside world; it is, Ms. Pechonchyk told us, "a kind of ghetto where no international organizations have access and there is no independent media." More than a dozen Crimean news organizations were forced to move out of the province after a number of journalists were persecuted and prosecuted. Now their websites, and others, are blocked by Crimean authorities. Mykola Semena, a veteran reporter who persisted in writing for the Radio Liberty website Crimea Realities, is on trial on charges of inciting separatism and faces five years in prison.

Even the slightest hint of opposition to Russia's rule is crushed. A farmer named Vladimir Balukh who flew a Ukrainian flag over his house is being tried on trumped-up weapons charges and could receive four years in prison. But the worst persecution is reserved for members of Crimea's Tatar ethnic minority. Its principle organization, the Mejlis, has been banned as a terrorist group and its leaders exiled, jailed or, in one case, forcibly confined to a psychiatric institution. Crimeans are prohibited even from mentioning the Mejlis on social media.

In May 2016, a rising new Tatar leader, Ervin Ibragimov, disappeared; he was last seen being bundled into a car by Russian secret police. Nineteen other men, including human rights activist Emir-Usein Kuku, are being prosecuted on charges of membership in the banned terrorist group Hizb ut-Tahrir — charges Amnesty International said were, in at least the case of Mr. Kuku, groundless.

Ms. Pechonchyk and Olga Skrypnyk, the exiled board chairman of the Crimean Human Rights Group, arrived in Washington this week with lists of dozens of Russian and Crimean officials implicated in these abuses. One cites more than 70 judges who have ordered unlawful detentions, while another identifies those complicit in repression of the media. The activists would like to see these officials added to those subject to sanctions by the United States and the European Union, including through the use of the Magnitsky Act, which provides for action against officials involved in persecuting human rights activists.

The point of sanctions is not only to punish. Pressure needs to be raised on Moscow until it agrees to international negotiations on its Crimea occupation, like those it has with Ukraine, France and Britain on its military incursion in eastern Ukraine. "Russia is not listening to resolutions," said Ms. Pechonchyk. "The only language Russia understands is sanctions."

The Washington Post

Homeland Security official: Russian government actors tried to hack election systems in 21 states

People connected to the Russian government tried to hack election-related computer systems in 21 states, a Department of Homeland Security official testified Wednesday.

Samuel Liles, the Department of Homeland Security's acting director of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis Cyber Division, said vote-tallying mechanisms were unaffected and that the hackers appeared to be scanning for vulnerabilities — which Liles likened to walking down the street and looking at homes to see who might be inside.

But hackers successfully exploited a "small number" of networks, Liles said, likening the act to making it through a home's front door.

Liles was testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee, which is investigating Russia's efforts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election, and his remarks add some clarity to the breadth of the Kremlin's cyber mischief. Officials in Arizona and Illinois had previously confirmed that hackers targeted their voter registration system, though news reports suggested the Russian effort was much broader.

Former Homeland Security secretary Jeh Johnson outlined how Russian interference in the election did not affect voting machine tallies, but could have affected the election in other ways, during a House Intelligence Committee hearing on June 21 at the Capitol. Johnson clarifies Russian interference didn't impact vote tallies, but could have affected election (Reuters)

(Reuters)

Bloomberg reported earlier this month that Russian hackers "hit" systems in 39 states, and the Intercept, citing a classified intelligence document, reported that Russian military intelligence "executed a cyberattack on at least one U.S. voting software supplier and sent spear-phishing emails to more than 100 local election officials just days before last November's presidential election."

In a separate hearing before the House Intelligence Committee on Tuesday, former Department of Homeland Security secretary Jeh Johnson testified that Russia's meddling, directed by President Vladimir Putin, was "unprecedented, the scale and the scope of what we saw them doing." The testimony came a day after White House press secretary Sean Spicer said at a briefing he did not know whether President Trump believes Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election.

In addition to scanning voting systems for vulnerabilities, U.S. intelligence committees have said Russian hackers acquired and engineered the release of emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta.

"In retrospect, it would have been easy for me to say I should have brought a sleeping bag and camped out in front of the DNC in the late summer," Johnson testified. He said the severity of Russia's efforts persuaded him to sign onto an Oct. 7 statement publicly blaming the Kremlin for what had happened, even though doing so could have been perceived as "taking sides" or "challenging the integrity of the election itself."

"My view is that we needed to do it, and we needed to do it well before the election to inform American voters of what we saw," Johnson said. He added: "I think the larger issue is it did not get the public attention that it should have, because the same day the press was focused on the release of the Access Hollywood video." That video showed Trump bragging about kissing and groping women.

Officials declined to say which 21 states were targeted or identify those that actually had data — such as voter registration lists — removed from their systems. Jeanette Manfra, the acting deputy undersecretary for cybersecurity and communications, said she could not do so because it was important to protect the confidentiality of those victimized.

FBI Assistant Director of Counterintelligence Bill Priestap testified Wednesday before the Senate Intelligence Committee that Russians also pushed false news reports and propaganda online, using amplifiers to spread their message. He said Russia for years has tried to influence U.S. elections but that the "scale" and "aggressiveness" of its efforts in 2016 made the attempts more significant.

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

Russian President Vladimir Putin denied the validity of U.S. intelligence reports that claim Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election. Putin spoke at a forum in St. Petersburg moderated by Megyn Kelly. Russian President Vladimir Putin denied the validity of U.S. intelligence reports that claim Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election. (Reuters)

(Reuters)

"The Internet has allowed Russia to do so much more today than they've ever been able to do in the past," Priestap said. He said Russia's goal was to "sow discord" in the United States and to "denigrate" Clinton and help Trump.

Johnson suggested that in the aftermath of the hacking, the federal government should "encourage a uniform set of minimum standards for cybersecurity when it comes to state elections system and voter registration databases."

But he acknowledged that doing so might be a heavy lift, given that state election officials are naturally suspicious of what he called a "federal takeover" of their election practices.

"State election officials are very sensitive about what they perceive to be federal intrusion into their process," Johnson said, noting that he often encountered officials pushing back and arguing that "it's our process, our responsibility."

This Is How Great-Power Wars Get Started

Emile Simpson

In the last month, for the first time since the civil war in Syria began in 2011, the United States has directly attacked Syrian government forces or proxies — not just once, but at least four times. The urgent question now is less about Syria than Russia, which in response to the latest of these incidents, in which a U.S. fighter plane shot down a Syrian jet, threatened to target any U.S.-led coalition aircraft flying over Syria.

Are the U.S. and Russia being sucked into war in the Middle East, and if so, how can escalation be averted?

The present political dynamics in the Middle East are unsettled and kaleidoscopic. But in the interests of brevity, leaving aside smaller players, and before we think about the role of the United States and Russia, the basic configurations of power in the region since the 2011 Arab Spring can be simplified in terms of five loose groupings.

First, a grouping of Sunni monarchies (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Bahrain); Arab secular nationalists (Egypt since President Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi took over in 2013, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia); and Gen. Khalifa Haftar's faction in eastern Libya.

Second, a grouping of Turkey; Qatar; and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates such as Hamas in Gaza, Egypt under President Morsi before 2013, and the internationally-recognized Libyan government based in the western part of that country.

Third, a grouping of Iran and its Shiite allies, including Iraq (at least among key factions of the Baghdad government), the Assad regime in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Fourth, the collection of various Sunni jihadi networks, including the Islamic State, various al Qaeda affiliates, and any number of smaller factions.

Fifth, there is Israel, which does not fit into any of the above, but is most closely aligned with members of the first grouping.

Three key stories since the 2011 Arab Spring broadly explain how the United States and Russia fit into these dynamics, and why these two great powers are being dragged into confrontation in the Middle East.

The first story is the tension between human rights and stability. Initially motivated by humanitarian impulse, the United States and its Western allies achieved regime change in Libya and attempted it in Syria, by backing rebels in each case. These rebellions rapidly became infected by radical Islamists, giving Russia the opportunity, not unreasonably, to claim that, in the interest of preventing Islamist chaos, it was backing strongmen on the opposite side (Haftar in Libya and Assad in Syria).

Egypt is a similar case. Russia took advantage of the Obama administration's aversion to the Sisi regime's human rights abuses following the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood rule to increase Russian influence in Cairo, as exemplified by Egypt's current diplomatic support for the Russian intervention in Syria.

The second story is the 2015 Iran nuclear deal brokered by the Obama administration, and reluctantly accepted by the Trump administration, whose advocates claimed that it was the best way to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon without the resort to force. Russia joined sanctions against Iran, but since they were lifted, Moscow has developed warmer relations with Tehran, as exemplified by the way it acted as a key broker between Saudi Arabia and Iran to set up the November 2016 OPEC agreement.

By contrast with Moscow, the Trump administration has taken a hard-line stance toward Tehran. It has various motives for that shift: Iranian missile testing since the deal was signed; Iranian support for Shiite militia groups in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and

Lebanon; and a belief that traditional U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel are in need of greater support (notwithstanding that many Israelis supported the nuclear deal).

The third story is the role that radical Sunni Islamist networks now play in the region, enabled by social media and other online tools that facilitate networking. One simply cannot explain the speed and scale at which the Islamic State formed, for example, without that network effect. These fluid jihadi networks have proved effective in exploiting tears in the fabric of order in fragile states, and then governing captured ground, predominantly in areas with Sunni majority populations, above all in western Iraq, northern Syria, and southern Yemen.

When one puts these three stories together, we see the nexus of the current U.S.- Russia standoff in Syria.

When one puts these three stories together, we see the nexus of the current U.S.- Russia standoff in Syria.

At the center of the nexus is the fact that while the U.S.-led coalition has done a good job of beating back the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the policy goal under both the Obama and Trump administrations has only been negatively defined as the defeat of the Islamic State. Neither administration has set out a positive vision for who will govern territory cleared of the Islamic State. In other words, the U.S. has a military strategy without a political counterpart — and the more the Islamic State's territorial control has been squeezed, the more evident the absence of U.S. political strategy has become.

Enter the Trump administration, which in keeping with its broader hard-line stance toward Iran, has been consistently clear about who it does *not* want to govern r-captured ground, namely, Iran-backed Shiite militias, who form a large part both of Assad's ground forces and indeed Baghdad's.

Hence the Trump administration has taken the view that both Sunni jihadi groups and Shiite militias should be grouped under the same category of radical Islamic terrorism. Consistent with this, it has stepped up action against Shiite paramilitary groups in Syria. Furthermore, the administration's hard-line attitude, conveyed by Trump in his visit to Riyadh in May, encouraged the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, on the basis of alleged Qatari support for Iranian proxies.

But the glaring absence of a U.S. positive political vision in the Middle East has left its negatively defined anti-Islamic State and anti-Iranian goals untethered, which has generated regional confusion. Imagine a sheepdog who is good at barking, but has little sense of direction: The Middle East is now in the position of its harried flock.

Even the administration itself seemed confused about how to respond to the implications of its own strategy, as was clear from its plainly contradictory signals on the Qatar crisis: While President Trump initially enthusiastically endorsed the blockade of Qatar in public, his national security team sought to de-escalate it behind the scenes, and this calmer line seems to be prevailing.

So, what does Washington positively want? Who knows.

So, what does Washington positively want? Who knows.

Although the most likely outcome of the Qatar crisis at this point is a U.S. brokered de-escalation, it is likely that a jilted Doha will subsequently look to become less dependent on the United States by building up existing relations with Turkey, which already has a base in Doha; Russia, which already has strong commercial links with the emirate (Qatar owns a large stake in Rosneft, for example); and Iran, with whom it needs good relations given the need to cooperate over the shared exploitation of natural gas fields in the Persian Gulf.

The limits of having no positive political strategy are also evident in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the United States military has effectively helped clear ground for Iranian Shiite militias to backfill, which contradicts the administration's anti-Iranian position. The only real alternative is to support a greater governance role for Kurdish groups, potentially as part of an enlarged independent Kurdish state. But so far, the U.S. position has been to support the unity of Iraq.

In Syria, the situation is more complex, because unlike the Iraqi Kurds, who have reasonably good relations with Ankara, the Turkish government is vehemently opposed to any kind of independent Kurdish state in northern Syria. But the U.S.-led coalition overwhelmingly relies on Kurdish ground forces in Syria, and they hold most of the ground cleared from the Islamic State. Does the United States support a Kurdish state in northern Syria? We don't know. Has it provided any alternative to a Kurdish state in northern Syria? No. Is the territory still legally part of Syria? Yes. Unsurprisingly, there is serious confusion on the ground, which has produced the U.S.-Russian escalation we see today.

So back to the original question: Are we are headed toward a great-power conflict in the middle east? In my view, until the U.S. presents a positive political strategy, we will continue to have direct clashes between Russian-supported Shiite militias and U.S. forces, which may well produce an accident in which either Russia shoots down a U.S. plane or vice versa. Even then, I think that neither Washington nor Moscow would rationally want a conventional fight. But conflict dynamics are never wholly rational; far from it. Violence can generate new emotional pressures in conflict and spin out of control in a direction nobody anticipated.

Besides the risk of escalation with Russia, the more the United States starts directly attacking Shiite militias, the more likely the Iranian nuclear deal will completely break down. This would reopen the possibility of a U.S. war with Iran. Even before that point, Iran would likely react to counter the United States in the region by exerting much more aggressive influence over Baghdad. The nightmare scenario would be an Iranian puppet like ex-Prime Minister Nouri alMaliki getting back into power, and issuing a demand for U.S. forces to leave Iraq, which would put Washington in a vexed position of either accepting or returning to direct rule.

To avoid escalations of this sort, the Trump administration should now lay out a positively defined political vision for the Middle East, which would accompany and tether its negatively defined anti-Islamic State and anti-Iranian goals. At this time, the fundamental part of this vision must be a clear U.S. position on the future of Kurdish-held areas in Iraq and Syria.

Not Dazed, but Definitely Confused: Allies Struggle to Divine U.S. Policy

Emile Tamkin

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson testified last week before Congress, seeking to defend the wisdom of slashing his own budget by more than one-third while sketching his vision of American diplomacy in the years ahead.

But unlike in years past, U.S. allies aren't poring over Tillerson's testimony for meaningful signals of what U.S. policy is or will be; diplomats from around the world are learning that what Tillerson says is not necessarily a reliable guide to U.S. policy. The problem is that nothing much else is, either.

It's not that diplomats can't meet with relevant officials from the administration — several say access has actually increased under Trump. It's that those meetings often end with more questions than answers. That makes it hard to dispel the unease and concern that gripped many U.S. allies during last year's presidential campaign, when President Donald Trump tore up the U.S. foreign-policy playbook and has yet to find a new one.

"Even if we do get meetings" with the Department of State, a European source told Foreign Policy, "most of the time what happens is that they speak in personal capacity — they don't have capacity to speak for the administration."

The same is true for the National Security Council at the White House, "including on very sensitive issues." People say, "I cannot speak for the president, because I'm not sure what his position on this is."

That lack of clarity isn't limited to nitty-gritty points of policy. More than five months into the Trump administration, many allies and even rivals are still trying to figure out how the United States now sees its role in the world. Trump came into office blaring an "America First" message, and despite repeated soothing noises from some administration officials, has, especially in non-military matters, redoubled his rhetoric ever since.

Or, as Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland put it in a speech earlier this month, the United States "has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership."

After a tumultuous first meeting between NATO and Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated late last month that Germany could no longer fully rely on others.

Even Chinese President Xi Jinping has pleaded with Trump to uphold the international order, particularly when it comes to the open trading system that Washington has defended for 70-odd years. The Communist Xi used his speech in Davos, for example, to caution against economic isolationism.

If friends and foes alike are fretting about the course Washington is on, that's because since the end of World War II, the U.S. role has been, as Hillary Clinton once put it, echoing former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, "the indispensable nation."

The U.S. military underwrote global security for allies and others; Washington built and buttressed an open, global economic order that fueled decades of prosperity; and the United States sought, if imperfectly, greater global security by promoting values like human rights and democracy. And if the whole world has benefited from those decades of a stable order, few have benefited as much as the United States.

"We have so taken for granted these inherent stable structures that is the international system, that ensures U.S. leadership, security, and prosperity," Heather Conley of the Center for Strategic and International Studies told FP.

The prospect of the United States abdicating that role, in whole or part, is cause for worry for plenty of countries. For one diplomat from Eastern Europe — historically and painfully aware of the fickleness of great-power promises for small, vulnerable countries in the heart of Europe — it defies even speculating about.

For U.S. allies even closer to the potential front lines, they are hoping that past really is prologue.

"The United States is and will remain an indispensable foreign and security policy partner for Estonia and for all of Europe. The leadership of the United States in key security issues is important and we expect it to continue," said Maria Belovas, director general of the communications department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia.

"Estonia and the United States have always had good relations and our cooperation is continuing as expected — in a very practical and positive manner. Obviously we follow U.S. positions closely and if anything remains unclear we turn to our friend and ally for clarification."

There are reasons to be seeking clarification. Trump pointedly refused to reaffirm U.S. commitment to NATO's sacrosanct Article 5 mutual-defense guarantee at the big Brussels summit last month, only to reaffirm it later, in a stateside venue with no European defense chiefs present.

The U.S. retrenchment is apparent on issues from trade to climate change. Seventy years ago, the United States created the forerunner of the World Trade Organization to exorcise the protectionist demons that turned the 1930s into a "dark valley." A quarter century ago, President Bill Clinton pushed the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. And even though then-Sen. Barack Obama railed against NAFTA on the campaign trail, the cornerstone of his legacy was meant to be a pair of sweeping, multilateral trade deals in Asia and Europe encompassing the bulk of the global economy. Trump killed the first and is leery of the second, frustrating U.S. allies who'd gone to the mat to sell the ambitious deals to skeptical publics.

"We would aspire for a free and fair trade regime governing the Asia-Pacific region," a Japanese diplomat said, rather than the bilateral accord the administration seems to favor.

"We still believe the U.S. will come back to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. That is our hope. But of course the U.S. has its own sort of agenda for the time being, so it might not happen immediately."

Washington's reluctance to keep carrying Freeland's "mantle" of global leadership creates a quandary for everyone, because nobody else is willing or able to take its place. And history shows that the global system, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

China has been hankering for a place in the sun all century — but, like Augustine, doesn't want it quite yet, and Beijing's values aren't the same as those long preached by Washington or Brussels.

Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is happy to shoulder a bigger role in regional defense and security — but that could put the government on a collision course with China, and even with the people of Japan, who are still, broadly speaking, pacifistic. And as seen in the scramble after the U.S. withdrawal from TPP, Tokyo is hard-pressed to drive Asian economic integration on its own.

Europe has been roused from its groggy decades — more because of the threat from a resurgent Russia than from Trump's admonitions to spend more on defense — but hasn't sought to play more than second fiddle for almost a century. ("We don't see ourselves acting as new superpower or pretending to be one," said the European diplomat.)

"We are ready to carry our part of the burden," Gérard Araud, French ambassador to Washington, told reporters this week. But "we prefer by far to do it with our American friends."

Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) faced a deeply unappetizing political calculus this week after the Senate passed by an overwhelming margin an aggressive sanctions bill targeting Russia.

If Ryan brought the bill to the floor, it would likely pass, because it had enough Iran-related measures to ensure Republican support, and no one wants to look weak on Russia right now. If he referred it one of several committees with jurisdiction on the issue, the bill may die a death by a thousand cuts. Or, Ryan could introduce his own measure, creating a split with the Senate and more differences to be resolved.

The measure, passed by a 97-to-2 margin in the Senate, would write key existing sanctions on Russia into law and further target Russian energy firms and its defense-industrial complex. It represents a stunning rebuke of the Trump administration, with one Hill aide describing it as a "congressional takeover of Russia policy."

"It's a bill that any administration would hate," said the congressional source. "It's a serious insult to the president."

On Tuesday Ryan fell back on a constitutional technicality to stall the measure. The bill, which significantly ratchets up sanctions on both Russia and Iran, violates the origination clause of the Constitution, he argued, referring to the requirement that any bill raising revenue originate in the House.

AshLee Strong, a spokeswoman for Ryan, told Foreign Policy that the bill cannot be considered by the House in its current form and that the speaker will "determine the next course of action" after consulting with the Senate.

The Trump administration, like any White House, would normally be able to push back against the tough Senate measures, which constrain executive authority and break ranks with European allies. But Trump is currently hobbled by multiple investigations into possible connections between his campaign and Russian operatives, which would make any House concessions on sanctions look like a handout to the Kremlin.

Tuesday's procedural machinations reveal an extraordinary political dynamic on the Hill, as Congress has in recent weeks moved to straitjacket the president in his typical latitude to carry out foreign affairs.

Indeed, after its passage, Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, openly acknowledged the measure was a congressional power-grab. "It marks a significant shift of power back to the people's representatives," Corker wrote on Twitter.

Senate Democrats quickly seized on the explosive politics of the Russia scandal to lambaste the delay in the House.

"House Republicans are considering using a procedural excuse to hide what they're really doing: Covering for a president who has been far too soft on Russia," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a statement.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told lawmakers last week that he opposed the measure, but the White House has so far kept a fairly low profile on the issue. Ryan's procedural move on Tuesday may provide them with time to tweak the measure and water down its key components.

The Senate measure would write into law sanctions imposed by President Barack Obama in retaliation for Russian meddling in the 2016 election and its seizure of Crimea in 2014. Obama imposed those sanctions by executive order — which Trump has the ability lift at any time — and congressional codification of those measures would also require an act of congress to undo them.

The bill would severely undermine high-tech energy exploration and exports by Russian oil and gas firms, would hobble Moscow's ability to sell arms abroad, and includes tools to scuttle the development of the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank hawkish on Russia issues, described the measures as "monumental" in an analysis.

Russian officials are furious at the bill, which if ultimately passed would ratchet up tensions between Moscow and Washington, which are already escalating in battlefields from the Baltic to Syria. One Hill aide described Russian officials in Washington as "apoplectic" about the proposal.

Russian officials in Washington have told lawmakers that if the measure passes they will have no choice but to respond, though it remains unclear exactly how Moscow would retaliate.

By eliminating Trump's ability to maneuver, the Senate bill may lock Russia and the United States into a path of confrontation, and how far Moscow is willing to go in the current game of brinkmanship represents one of the key questions for American policy in Congress and the White House, the congressional aide said.

Already, relations between Washington and Moscow are

worsening. On Monday, the Russian military said any American war plane west of the Euphrates in Syria would be considered a legitimate target after U.S. forces downed a Syrian air force jet on Sunday. On Monday, a Russian fighter jet flew within five feet of a U.S. plane over the Baltic Sea. Many fear that an expanded and locked-in sanctions regime could push the Kremlin to test the outer limits of its adventurism.

Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin are scheduled to meet in July, and if the sanctions bill is still hanging in the balance, the American leader's hand could be strengthened. He could tell Putin that he is dealing with a group of hard-line lawmakers in Congress and that he lacks the ability to maneuver against the sanctions bill because of Russian interference in the election on his behalf.

Trump could claim that he requires a concrete move from Russia to improve relations if he is to kill the sanctions bill.

But's it not clear just what that could be. After three years of combat, Moscow isn't likely to abandon the separatist forces it supports in eastern Ukraine. Nor is Moscow about to pull the plug on its alliance with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and give up its position in the eastern Mediterranean. There's little reason to believe that the Kremlin will stop seeking to divide the European Union, interfere with Western elections, or intimidate smaller neighbors.

At best, Putin could conceivably pledge to implement the Minsk agreement to end fighting in eastern Ukraine — but that's a promise he has made and broken more than once.

POLITICO

White House shows no sign of reopening Paris talks

By Andrew Restuccia

Three weeks after President Donald Trump pledged to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement and negotiate a better deal, foreign allies and U.S. officials alike remain perplexed about the White House's plans going forward.

Two U.S. officials told POLITICO that senior White House aides, who are prioritizing health care legislation and increasingly preoccupied by the expanding Russia probe, have had very few internal conversations about the administration's Paris strategy since Trump's announcement. One official said the administration likely won't begin mapping out its next moves until after the July G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany.

Story Continued Below

Interviews with a half-dozen foreign officials and veteran climate negotiators show the international community is deeply uncertain in the meantime about how to interpret Trump's June 1 Rose Garden speech, in which he vowed to "begin negotiations to re-enter either the Paris accord or an entirely new transaction, on terms that are fair to the United States."

"Nobody has a clue what the administration is thinking," said one foreign diplomat, who like others quoted in this story requested anonymity to discuss the issue. "The announcement is so vague. Nobody knows what it means."

Left unsaid in Trump's speech: What will it take for the U.S. to re-enter the Paris agreement? What exactly would a new negotiation entail? Will the U.S. cease participation in United Nations climate negotiations altogether? Is Trump even interested in staying in the agreement if he wins concessions?

The deep divide within the administration over the Paris deal makes it nearly impossible for foreign diplomats, who have had sporadic contact with U.S. officials, to know who is best articulating Trump's current thinking on the issue. White House National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Ivanka Trump and others all argued for staying in the agreement, while chief strategist Steve Bannon and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt pressured Trump to withdraw altogether.

Diplomats said their early communications with the United States about next steps on Paris have yielded little new information. One well-connected foreign diplomat explained that he's heard "nothing from a unified voice of the administration that suggests they have a cohesive policy."

A White House spokeswoman declined to comment on Trump's strategy, saying only that the administration continues to "engage with our international counterparts about shared environmental goals."

Amid all the uncertainty, one thing is increasingly clear: there is almost no chance other countries are going to agree to reopen the Paris deal itself, which was the product of decades of diplomacy and won the support of nearly 200 nations when it was finalized in 2015.

Within hours of Trump's announcement, France, Germany and Italy declared in a statement that the agreement can't be rewritten. "The Paris agreement is here to stay and the 29 articles of the Paris agreement are not to be renegotiated," EU Climate Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete told reporters earlier this month.

Conservative opponents of the agreement, who hope Trump's announcement portends the permanent end of U.S. involvement in the Paris deal, are thrilled that the other countries have ruled out renegotiation.

"The Europeans in particular are not going to renegotiate Paris, and therefore, it's really just kind of a PR exercise," said Myron Ebell, a vocal critic of climate change science who led the Trump transition operations EPA team, of Trump's pledge to negotiate a better deal.

Ebell put the odds of the U.S. remaining in the Paris deal at 50 to 1. "I just don't see how we can do it," he said.

Any effort by Trump to remain in the agreement would be met with fierce opposition from conservatives, who mounted a months-long behind-the-scenes campaign to pressure the president to withdraw. Hardline critics of the agreement, including Pruitt and Bannon, have no intention of allowing for a path back into the accord, said an administration official familiar with their thinking.

But those in the administration who argued vehemently in favor of remaining in the agreement see some wiggle room in Trump's remarks, according to the administration officials.

Some U.S. and foreign climate experts are beginning to privately make the case to the administration that even a minor concession from other countries — or a weakening of former President Barack Obama's domestic climate change target — could be enough to declare victory and stay in the deal. The tough talk in the Rose Garden is enough to satisfy Trump's base, they argue.

Yet since Trump's speech the White House's most powerful figures have again disengaged, turning their attention to health care, tax reform and other policy issues – while the government's climate policy experts are increasingly disempowered.

"The people who have the keys to the ignition aren't driving the car, and the people who want to drive the car don't have the keys," one diplomat quipped.

The recent meeting of G7 environment ministers gave the international community little hope that the U.S. is open to finding a middle ground on climate change. While the environmental ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom signed on to a joint statement reaffirming their "strong commitment" to the Paris deal, Pruitt abstained.

It also remains unclear what role Trump administration negotiators will play in future climate talks. Since the U.S. has not formally withdrawn from Paris yet, the State Department can still participate in future Paris-related discussions, including a high-profile summit in Bonn, Germany, in November. The U.S. also co-chairs a United Nations working group tasked with increasing transparency as countries comply with the Paris deal.

Noting that the U.S. is still a member of the United Nations treaty that governs international climate talks, a State Department official told POLITICO the administration "will participate in international climate change meetings consistent with its national interests," but declined to offer any specifics.

During the G20 summit, foreign officials will be watching closely for signs of whether Trump is serious about trying to find a way to stay in Paris.

Trump could also find more like-minded foreign leaders among the G20's broader group of participants. Though nearly every G20 country has signaled its intention to remain in the Paris deal, some nations are seen as being less committed than others. The Europeans have privately raised fears that Trump could team up with countries like Saudi Arabia to form a coalition of nations that are less focused on climate change, blowing up an effort by the Germans to show unity when it comes to the global commitment to reduce emissions.

But, at least in public, European officials remain confident that other countries aren't wavering in their commitment to tackling climate change.

"Clearly, we regret that the United States has decided to take a different path so early in the life of this agreement," David O'Sullivan, the European Union's ambassador to the United States, told members of Congress this week during an

event hosted by House Democrats. "But we are reassured that the Paris agreement will live on as the other signatories show unity and resolved in pursuing collective action to ensure the future of our planet."

Editorial : Congress Steps Up on Foreign Policy

When President Trump began taking a wrecking ball to some of America's traditional foreign policies, going so far as to threaten the country's long and sturdy relationship with its Western European allies, many hoped that the other branches of government would provide a counterweight to the executive branch, and restrain his worst impulses.

The federal courts helped by slamming the brakes on Mr. Trump's travel ban against several Muslim-majority countries. Now the Republican-led Congress, especially the Senate, is beginning to assert itself on national security issues in a mostly constructive manner.

Last week, the Senate provided reassurance to European allies jittery about America's commitment to NATO by voting unanimously to affirm Article 5, the 68-year-old alliance's core mutual defense provision. Mr. Trump denigrated NATO during his campaign and refused to embrace Article 5 during his recent European trip.

As Mr. Trump continued to display indifference, even hostility, to findings that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to strengthen sanctions against Russia. For too long, Republican leaders had indulged Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's pleadings to delay a sanctions vote while he attempted to forge a new relationship with his Russian counterpart, a dubious proposition.

It's obviously in everyone's interest for the United States to find areas of cooperation with Moscow; Russia is a major power and the only country with a nuclear arsenal comparable to America's. But there has been no sign that Mr. Tillerson, a former ExxonMobil chairman and chief executive with close ties to the Kremlin, has won any concession that suggests Moscow is willing to end its aggressive behavior and engage seriously with Washington.

Russia's mischief knows few boundaries. The country is still destabilizing Ukraine, using its military force to defend President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, undermining democracy across Europe and trying to woo vulnerable NATO members in Eastern Europe to its side.

Reports that Mr. Tillerson wants to work with Russia on cybersecurity issues seem especially premature, not least because the Kremlin hasn't admitted to hacking the Democratic campaign as well as the actual voting data in nearly 40 states.

Given the absence of any real progress, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was quite right to move forward with the sanctions bill, which passed the full Senate by a vote of 97 to 2. It would adds sanctions and allow Congress to block presidential efforts to reduce existing sanctions. That is a necessary precaution given that Mr. Trump's fondness for President Vladimir Putin could cause him to prematurely lift the penalties imposed for the invasion of Ukraine and meddling in the American election.

In another effort to correct a bad decision by Mr. Trump, the Senate tried to block a $500 million arms sale to Saudi Arabia, which on Wednesday underwent a major leadership shuffle in the ruling royal family. The arms sale makes the United States complicit with the Saudis in the civil war in Yemen, which has killed untold numbers of civilians. The measure failed, but received more support than it had in the past.

And after dragging its feet for years, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday began considering legislation intended to assert more power over military troop deployments. The president has largely ceded that authority to the Pentagon. Meanwhile, many legislators have vowed not to approve Mr. Trump's budget, which would decimate the State Department. On a more granular level, a few senators have taken it upon themselves to smooth the ruffled feathers between Mr. Trump and foreign leaders.

To some extent, these battles are simply the latest manifestation of the long historical struggle for control over national security policy between the executive and legislative branches.

The Constitution divides war-making between the Congress, which controls taxes and spending, and the president, who is vested with executive power and the power to act as the military's commander in chief.

Since 9/11, there has been a striking expansion of the president's executive power, particularly in the area of national security, and there is little doubt that the executive, in this case Mr. Trump, remains the most influential player on the world stage. But that does not mean that Congress has to remain silent, or shy from challenging any president on national security issues, correcting or mitigating mistakes that could threaten the nation.

There is even a hint of bipartisanship in this particular Congress's efforts to compensate for this particular executive. That, too, is a good thing.

ETATS-UNIS

Editorial : The Supreme Court's Chance to End the Gerrymander

"Fair and effective representation for all citizens," the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled, is a requirement of democracy. In the half-century since that decision, however, the court has declined several chances to strike down a practice that undermines this standard. Now it has another opportunity, and it should not let it go to waste.

There are good reasons for the court's reticence about gerrymandering, the practice of drawing legislative districts to exploit partisan advantage. Partisan loyalties are fluid, and there's no "apolitical" way to draw voting districts. The court is also mindful of the legislative branch's prerogative to conduct its own affairs. Nevertheless, the court has accepted a Wisconsin case that shows a way to make congressional elections more fair and efficient.

The legislative map the state's Republican lawmakers drew was notably lopsided; in the 2012 election, the first using the new district lines, Republicans won 60 of 99 state assembly seats despite winning less than half of the statewide vote. In a 2-1 ruling, a federal panel ruled that the map is so partisan that it violated Democrats' constitutional rights of equal protection -- diluting the power of their votes.

There is no recognized judicial standard for determining when a map becomes too partisan; the Supreme Court has never found a map so egregious that it failed to pass constitutional muster. In a 2004 opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy noted "the lack of comprehensive and neutral principles for drawing electoral boundaries." Since then, however, the combination of growing hyper-partisanship -- and ever more exact computer programs designed to maximize partisan advantage in drawing districts -- have led to a near crisis.

The plaintiffs in this case offer a way out, presenting a novel "efficiency" test to measure whether a district is so gerrymandered as to be unconstitutional. There are other standards for analyzing the effects of gerrymanders. But this one is appealing because it offers the justices a way to assess fairness by taking partisanship into account without trying to control for it.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Share the View

American democracy is designed to withstand some amount of political imbalance. The incumbent president, after all, received almost 3 million fewer votes than his opponent. In the U.S. Senate, the

voices of Californians are drastically discounted compared with those of Montanans. Such inequities are built into the federal system and the Electoral College. Their firm foundation makes them no less unfair, however. Because unfairness undermines democratic ideals and the faith necessary to realize them, it should be mitigated when possible.

As the court considers the effects of districts drawn for maximum partisan advantage -- in effect, maximum unfairness -- it should weigh the costs of partisanship borne by millions of American voters, Democrat and Republican alike.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Rove : The GOP's Narrow Escape in Georgia

Karl Rove

Before Tuesday's special election in Georgia's Sixth Congressional District, many journalists were ready to declare a victory by Democrat Jon Ossoff proof the GOP is doomed to lose its congressional majorities next year. Flipping the seat would have shown definitively the Trump presidency is a kiss of death for Republican candidates. But Republican Karen Handel won, by 3.8 points, blowing these story lines into oblivion.

It was history's most expensive House race: Mr. Ossoff had at least $31.2 million spent on his behalf to $22.7 million for Ms. Handel. These totals will grow when more campaign-finance reports come in. The Democrats did not spend their money well. While Mr. Ossoff won 48.1% to Ms. Handel's 19.8% in the April 19 open primary, he received the same percentage Tuesday. Meantime, Ms. Handel won more votes than did the 11 GOP candidates combined two months ago.

It would be understandable if Republicans took this victory—the fourth in as many special congressional elections this year—as an opportunity to celebrate. But the GOP has important lessons to internalize too.

First, the ground game matters immensely. With multiple Republican hopefuls keeping the party apparatus neutral, only Democrats mounted an effective get-out-the-vote effort in April. But in June's one-on-one race, the GOP dusted off its old GOTV manuals, deployed organizers, and did the basic work of canvassing and phoning to persuade and turn out voters.

Democrats increased Mr. Ossoff's vote by more than 32,000 over his April showing. Yet the GOP rallied some 96,000 more votes for Ms. Handel by focusing on Republicans who didn't vote in April and were unlikely to vote in June without special attention. The Congressional Leadership Fund spent $1 million on the ground game and digital ads targeted at 100,000 such voters. People who didn't vote in April made up at least 22% of Tuesday's turnout.

Tuesday's results prove it is possible to make these contests about more than Donald Trump. Ms. Handel won 51.9% while data from one conservative super PAC suggested only 38% of voters approved of Mr. Trump. Enough swing voters apparently don't believe every Republican candidate is responsible for everything the president says and does.

Anger at Mr. Trump alone won't attract the swing voters Democrats need to take Congress. Plus, Mr. Trump isn't inexorably destined to become less popular. His approval ratings could rise if he enacts reform legislation. Democrats must offer an attractive agenda to draw suburban voters while maintaining the outrage of their party's left wing. The Georgia election shows how difficult that is, even with virtually unlimited campaign cash.

In open seats, the GOP needs to field candidates with records of getting things done in government, business or the military. Ms. Handel was an awkward candidate, but her record as Fulton County board chairman and Georgia secretary of state proved her effectiveness in office. This provided a strong contrast with Mr. Ossoff's exaggerated résumé.

Republicans would do well to encourage congressmen not to retire. Incumbency alone doesn't guarantee victory, but independent and unaligned voters are often swayed by it. Passing ambitious legislation on the economy, tax reform, health care and defense could boost the incumbency advantage further. The fewer retirements, the more the party can focus limited resources on races truly at risk.

Finally, Democrats have done better at building the networks to generate massive small-dollar contributions over the internet for special elections, but it's unclear how transferable that strength will be to the general election. Similarly, House Republicans have more resources at their party committee and super PACs, but it isn't clear that will be sufficient to re-elect the GOP House majority.

After escaping defeat Tuesday, many Republicans felt not just relieved but exhilarated. It's fine to take a moment to be happy at Tuesday's outcome, but it was still a hard race in what should be a safe GOP district. The 2018 midterm elections won't be pretty for Republicans, but the election Tuesday showed they don't have to be a catastrophe.

Mr. Rove helped organize the political-action committee American Crossroads and is the author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

The Washington Post

Dan Balz : Georgia race provides a wake-up call for both Democrats and Republicans

Analysis Interpretation of the news based on evidence, including data, as well as anticipating how events might unfold based on past events

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June 21 at 2:19 PM

For all the money spent and the endless pre-election analysis about the meaning of it all, the special congressional election in Georgia's 6th District produced a status quo result. Republican Karen Handel held on to a seat long held by the Republicans. For both parties, there are lessons to be learned.

Any House race that generates $50 million in spending — it was the costliest in history — is hardly a generic laboratory, and therefore the results are subject to over interpretation. In the fevered atmosphere that surrounded this contest in suburban Atlanta, it's easy to lose sight of fundamentals. This was a district that Democrats have rarely won — in congressional races, Senate races or state races.

That meant, when stripped of all the hype, the odds always were, narrowly, in Handel's direction. She was an almost ideal candidate for the district. Her Democratic opponent, Jon Ossoff, who did not even live in the district, was not. The late polls showed a tight race but gave Ossoff a slight edge (within the margin of error). Handel did better than the polls showed.

The outcome has been described as a wake-up call for Democrats, which it should be. The road to a congressional majority in 2018 remains challenging, despite hopes by many in the party that President Trump's unpopularity will generate enough grass-roots energy to sweep aside the GOP majority. Smart Democrats were always wary of the hype surrounding Ossoff's candidacy and the prospects for victory in Georgia. The results should bring others in the party back down to earth.

Trump won the district in 2016 by a point over Hillary Clinton. Handel's four-percentage-point margin exceeded Trump's, but it was significantly smaller than former congressman and current Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price received in recent elections. It was much smaller than other previous GOP occupants of the seat enjoyed before that and smaller by far than Mitt Romney's in 2012.

So Handel did better than the polls predicted but worse that Republicans generally do in the district. Chalk that up to two things: Open-seat races are often closer than races involving incumbents and the Trump effect on voters. The fundamentals of the district were in her favor, but her advisers always worried about the head winds created by the president. Without the current occupant of the White House, she probably would have won by a bigger margin.

It's instructive to look at what happened Tuesday in neighboring South Carolina, in a special election to fill the seat of Mick Mulvaney, the Trump administration's budget chief. Trump won that district handily in 2016, yet Democrat Archie Parnell came within a few points of defeating Republican Ralph Norman. The South Carolina

election got almost no national media attention, yet Parnell came a bit closer to winning than did Ossoff.

Viewed from that angle, the results Tuesday underscore the degree to which the political landscape has changed in the age of Trump. Democrats were unduly optimistic about the Georgia race, but what happened there and in South Carolina is consistent with what has happened in other congressional special elections this year. Democrats are winning a greater share of the vote in these districts than they have in the past.

The money and attention in Georgia produced a huge turnout and perhaps motivated Republicans to rally around Handel more than they might have in a normal special election. There was no question that Democratic voters were highly motivated. Republicans saw that coming and poured everything possible into trying to match that enthusiasm by turning out every voter possible. In South Carolina, Democrats sneaked up on Republicans and came close.

The Georgia contest drew attention because the district fit the narrative of the Trump era. It's highly educated electorate seemed ideal to test what was seen in 2016, which was strong support for Trump among non-college-educated white voters but significantly less among college-educated whites.

Even with that, the Democratic brand did not prove attractive enough in a suburban southern district. Ossoff tried to run as a moderate, but Republicans made sure he could not run away from a national party that has moved left. That remains a challenge for the party, whether in other suburban districts in the South and in the Senate races in red states with vulnerable Democratic incumbents.

Handel ran a localized race but had to battle against the Trump effect. GOP candidates in 2018 will have to try to do the same thing unless the president's approval rating rises from where it is now, which is about 40 percent.

The Handel victory will give the Republicans and the White House a psychological boost and probably keep them together in the coming months as they try to pass major pieces of their and Trump's agenda. Trump will see the results in Georgia and conclude that he still has the Democrats' number.

For Republicans, health-care legislation, soon to emerge from secrecy in the Senate, remains a struggle to enact. GOP leaders think failure is not an option but know that, even if successful in passing health care this year, they could be saddled with a bill that is highly unpopular, at least if current polling proves correct. Tax legislation has yet to come together and increasingly appears to be in the form of a tax cut rather than tax reform. The political implications of that remain murky.

There are no moral victories in politics. Republicans won on Tuesday in the most important special election this year. Democrats lost, as they have done in the other special elections in GOP-held seats this year.

For the national Democratic Party, the debate continues about developing a message that goes beyond attacking Trump, or assuming dissatisfaction with the president will be enough. But for Republicans, the results Tuesday were a reminder that victories will come harder with Trump in the White House.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : The Real Georgia Lesson

Democrats thought they could pick up a GOP-leaning House seat by turning Tuesday's special election in Georgia's sixth congressional district into a referendum on the Trump Presidency. The lesson of the GOP's four-percentage-point victory is that Republicans can preserve their congressional majority despite doubts about Donald Trump—if they deliver on their agenda.

Republicans staved off what the press would have portrayed as a catastrophe and portent of a GOP wipeout in next year's midterm elections. And they did so with a weak candidate in Karen Handel, a former Georgia secretary of state who lost bids for Governor in 2010 and U.S. Senate in 2014.

Democrats thought they could steal the seat because it is full of the upscale, college-educated Republicans who dislike Mr. Trump. While Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price was re-elected last November by 23 points, Hillary Clinton came within two points of beating Mr. Trump. Democrats—who, by the way, favor limits on campaign spending—poured $31 million into the district to turn out liberal voters.

Yet Republicans managed to turn out their voters by portraying Jon Ossoff, a 30-year-old former congressional aide who doesn't live in the district, as a foot soldier for Nancy Pelosi. Conservative voters showed they aren't ready to hand the House back to Mrs. Pelosi whatever their doubts about Mr. Trump.

One immediate benefit is that the victory might deter some Republican retirements that would create more open seats in 2018 if they fear a Democratic wave. But Democrats are still likely to turn out in big numbers next year. The challenge for Republicans will be to give their voters a reason to match that liberal enthusiasm. That's all the more reason to put accomplishments on the board that voters can see on health care, taxes and more.

As for Democrats, the defeat underlies the contradiction between the total resistance to Mr. Trump needed to win a primary and the centrist coloration needed to flip a GOP-leaning seat in areas like northern Virginia (held by Barbara Comstock) and Upper Hudson Valley New York (John Faso). Mr. Ossoff energized progressives by promising "to make Trump furious." After the primary he tacked to the middle by running as a fiscal conservative and against tax increases on the rich.

But by then Republicans were already defining him as a Pelosi pawn. It didn't help that so much of his cash came from liberal redoubts like San Francisco or that he was endorsed by Bernie Sanders. Some groups on the left like MoveOn.org are now saying that the lesson from Mr. Ossoff's defeat is that Democrats need to run as pure left-wing populists in 2018.

This left-center tension in the Democratic Party is likely to intensify, especially if the GOP racks up some policy victories, which could propel Democrats to nominate candidates who are too far left for the districts they need to win in 2018. But Republicans can't afford complacency, and their best defense against an anti-Trump wave is legislative success.

The Washington Post

Republicans are thrilled by their victory in Georgia, but the celebration may be brief

CHAMBLEE, Ga. — Republicans in the conservative Atlanta suburbs and across the country were elated Wednesday after their party beat back Democrats in a competitive special election, avoiding a loss that could have damaged President Trump's hopes of enacting his agenda.

But the celebration of Republican Karen Handel's victory in Georgia's Sixth congressional district may be brief.

Trump's priorities remain largely stalled on Capitol Hill and Tuesday's result, due to a unique set of circumstances, provides only a faint road map to either party as they strategize for next year's midterm elections. By some measures, the Georgia race only deepened the uncertainty around the choices facing both Republicans and the Democrats going forward.

"I'm encouraged," said Rep. Tom MacArthur (R-N.J.), a moderate who faces a tough reelection race against a marquee Democratic recruit. "Of course, it's a single election in a single district, so you can't read too much into it, in either direction."

Handel beat Ossoff by roughly four percentage points, or almost 11,000 votes, in what became the most expensive House race in history. The margin was surprisingly tight, given the fact the district has only elected Republicans to the House since 1978.

"I'm proud of how close we came," Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee executive director Dan Sena said on a post-election call with consultants, according to a listener who requested anonymity in order to discuss what was said. "Remember, folks: there are 71 districts that perform better than Georgia Six."

What cannot be replicated next year are the sheer amounts of resources and organization that poured into a single contest from all sides,

bringing the total cost of the race to more than $50 million.

Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff, a 30-year-old former congressional aide, also carried personal liabilities as a candidate, including a thin resume and the fact that he does not live in the district he sought to represent.

Democrats could still find themselves with an edge in the midterms, depending in large measure on how Trump — historically unpopular for a president so early in his tenure — performs in the next year-and-a-half.

But in their disappointment at the outcome of a race into which they had placed so much of the party's resources and its hopes, Democrats must confront a number of questions.

Ideological fractures remain in their party, with recriminations still flying over Hillary Clinton's unexpected loss in last year's presidential election. One choice facing the party is whether to embrace the hard line advocated by its ardent liberal base, or to take a more conciliatory and moderate stance as Ossoff did.

Another question is whether Democrats have the right leadership for the battle ahead. Handel and outside groups working on her behalf resurrected a well-worn Republican strategy of tying opponents to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), a symbol on the right of out-of-touch liberal values.

With yet another example of Republicans successfully using Pelosi as a political foil, some Democrats wondered Wednesday if it is approaching time for the 77-year-old leader and her deputies to step aside. The question tends to divide members of the House Democratic Caucus into two groups: the majority that hail from liberal districts and are loyal to Pelosi, and the minority in moderate or GOP-leaning areas that see her as a liability.

Rep. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.), 38, one of the most outspoken critics of the caucus's leadership, said Wednesday the party needs "a new generation of leadership — one focused on the future."

Rep. Kathleen Rice (D-N.Y.), 52, expressed similar views on Twitter, and in an interview with CNN, where she said: "It's time for Nancy Pelosi to go, and the entire leadership team."

For Republicans, the biggest quandary is how closely to tie their fortunes to an unpopular president and his freewheeling populism,

Observers point to Virginia's gubernatorial primary this month, where establishment favorite Edward J. Gillespie triumphed over a Trump-aligned candidate, though narrowly, as evidence the Trump model does not guarantee victory.

In another special election Tuesday night, a deep-red South Carolina House district elected Ralph Norman, a conservative businessman who has complimented Trump but did not try to emulate his style on the campaign trail. And Handel, herself an establishment Republican, tread cautiously in associating herself with Trump.

In her victory speech on Tuesday night, Handel thanked "the president of the United States" along with Vice President Mike Pence for their support. She did not mention Trump by name.

Some of Trump's allies had a strong message for Republicans on Wednesday: Resist the notion you're in danger of losing power, redouble efforts to advance the party's agenda and do more, not less, to embrace the president.

"If they've gotten advice to not mention him, that's bad advice," Sen. David Perdue (R-Ga.) said in an interview.

"The president is not an ideologue. He's a pragmatist. He's trying to get people shoulder to shoulder and execute on the plan," Perdue said. "Too many people in the Washington establishment are looking through a traditional lens."

Trump cheered Tuesday night's victories on Twitter. "Well, the Special Elections are over and those that want to MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN are 5 and O!" he wrote. "All the Fake News, all the money spent = 0."

The GOP victory in Georgia came at a critical moment. Senate Republicans are preparing to unveil their sweeping rewrite of U.S. health-care laws, even as rank-and-file members complain about the secrecy of the process and express concerns about aspects of the plan. Some of those members are already worrying privately about the political fallout they might face when voters lose coverage or face higher premiums under the new system.

Nodding to congressional Republicans' effort to revise the Affordable Care Act, she suggested it was time to move toward concluding that work. "We need to finish the drill on health care," Handel said.

But health-care is far from the only debate with potential pitfalls for Republican incumbents. Tax reform — a way to achieve the rate cuts Handel promised voters — is in limbo on Capitol Hill. And the investigation by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III into Russian interference in the 2016 election and whether Trump tried to obstruct justice is a variable that keeps Republicans on edge.

MacArthur, who has worked closely with Trump on health care in recent months and confronted waves of voter anger at town-hall meetings, is now facing a challenge from Democrat Andy Kim, a former Obama administration national security staffer who launched his campaign this week.

The southern New Jersey district has been a hotbed of Democratic activity in the past six months, and voters' heated opposition to MacArthur at public events has become fodder for cable news.

Shrugging off those clashes, MacArthur said the tide had not turned against him back home. "It's a loud, angry minority that has an agenda that doesn't click with my district. I believe that," he said.

Even in the wake of Ossoff's loss, some Democrats said the fact he was competitive in Atlanta's Republican suburbs could be a positive sign for next year, when they must win 24 GOP-held seats to claim a majority of seats in the House.

PowerPost's must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

"All of these special elections are a symbolic warning to Republicans, should things stay the way they are," Democratic strategist Robert Shrum said. "Presidents always have trouble in midterm elections when they've just been elected, and Trump has tremendous trouble with college-educated, suburban voters."

Viebeck and Tumulty reported from Washington.

The Washington Post

Dionne : Republicans won on Tuesday. But Trump didn't.

What we learned from Tuesday's special congressional election in Georgia is that there is no magical solution to the country's Trump problem. This will be a long fight.

Karen Handel's victory over Democrat Jon Ossoff was not an endorsement of the president. It was a personal and party success achieved despite him.

Democrats are, well, blue because a loss is a loss. You can measure their disappointment by imagining the triumphalism we'd be hearing had Ossoff prevailed. But nothing that happened should make Republicans feel secure about their hold on the House of Representatives. Nationalizing the swings against them in the special elections held for GOP seats this year would likely deprive them of control in 2018.

The key for Handel was the time she had between April's first round of voting (which Ossoff led in an open primary with 48.1 percent, just short of the majority he needed to settle matters then) and the second (in which Ossoff's vote almost precisely matched his earlier share).

"Ossoff's problem is that he didn't win the first round," Brian Fallon, senior adviser to Priorities USA, a Democratic super PAC, said in an interview. "The longer this race was in the national spotlight, the more money it drew from the Republicans, and the more they were able to consolidate their base."

And while Democrats were mourning in Georgia on Tuesday night, they almost stole a House seat in South Carolina where Archie Parnell came within about 2,800 votes and three percentage points of defeating Republican Ralph Norman.

In races without the national focus and Fort Knox-level spending seen in Georgia, energized anti-Trump voters appeared to turn out at far higher rates than dispirited Republicans. Thus did Democrats sharply cut the Republicans' 2016 margins in Kansas and Montana districts earlier this year. The moral for GOP strategists: They face real threats in less hospitable territory. This also suggests that Democrats should broaden their aspirations beyond suburban areas seen as especially hostile to President Trump.

Whit Ayres, a Republican consultant and Handel strategist, underscored her success in turning the contest into a normal partisan choice. "The voters decided that Karen Handel was a better representative of their values, their interests and their perspective than Jon Ossoff," he told me. "Karen Handel ran a relentlessly localized campaign that focused on that perspective."

Notice those words: “relentlessly localized.” To pull this off, Handel had to keep her distance from Trump. Ayres put the matter diplomatically: “The president structured the broader environment but didn’t determine the outcome of this particular race.” Exactly.

Yet if Trump was unpopular in the district, his approval rating, Fallon said, was “six or seven points higher” there than his standing nationwide. Trump was thus disliked enough to give Ossoff a chance but not so unpopular that “a screechingly anti-Trump campaign,” as Fallon put it, would have gone over well.

However, Fallon did see a lost opportunity. Ossoff, he said, could have run much more forcefully against the House Republican health-care bill, particularly its unpopular provisions that would undercut protections for those with preexisting conditions. Paradoxically, if the Georgia result encourages the Senate to join in passing a deeply flawed Obamacare repeal bill, it could hurt the GOP in the long run.

Handel also turned Ossoff’s residency about two miles outside the district into a cultural argument that his heart was actually 2,100 miles away, in San Francisco. “He’s just not one of us,” her ads said, and this message was reinforced by tying him to House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California — and perhaps inadvertently by Ossoff’s own promise to “grow metro Atlanta’s economy into the Silicon Valley of the South.” Pelosi’s enduring role as a Republican punching bag revived debate over whether her leadership is an electoral drag on the party, or if she is simply a convenient (female) symbol for attacks on liberalism that the GOP would level with or without her.

Everybody uses special elections to ratify whatever they thought before a single vote was counted. Do Democrats need a compelling economic message? Yes. Would the existence of such a message have won Ossoff this race? Probably not. Did Georgia make Republicans feel better and Democrats worse? Sure. Does this mean that Trump and the GOP are out of the woods? Not in the least.

Trump’s foes hoped that a district in Georgia would strike a decisive blow against him. But miracles rarely happen in politics, and suburban Atlanta Republicans were loyal enough to their party to decide that it wasn’t their job to deliver one.

The New York Times — Democrats Seethe After Georgia Loss: ‘Our Brand Is Worse Than Trump’ (UNE)

Alexander Burns and Jonathan Martin

Democrats scrambled to regroup on Wednesday after a disappointing special election defeat in Georgia, with lawmakers, activists and labor leaders speaking out in public and private to demand a more forceful economic message heading into the 2018 elections.

Among Democrats in Washington, the setback in Georgia revived or deepened a host of existing grievances about the party, accentuating tensions between moderate lawmakers and liberal activists and prompting some Democrats to question the leadership and political strategy of Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader.

A small group of Democrats who have been critical of Ms. Pelosi in the past again pressed her to step down on Wednesday. And in a private meeting of Democratic lawmakers, Representative Tony Cárdenas of California, Ms. Pelosi’s home state, suggested the party should have a more open conversation about her effect on its political fortunes.

But the most acute and widely expressed concerns were economic. Speaking after a meeting of the Democratic caucus on Wednesday morning, Representative Hakeem Jeffries of New York said the party was preparing to be “aggressively focused on job creation and economic growth.” And Representative Jim Himes of Connecticut, who represents an affluent district near New York City, said Democrats must do more to compete with what he described as expansive and unrealistic promises by President Trump.

“It’s not enough to say, ‘I want jobs,’” Mr. Himes said. “You need more than that, particularly when you’re competing with a guy who is telling fantasies.”

Representative Debbie Dingell of Michigan called for Democrats to go “on offense” and attack the president’s perceived strength on economic matters with working-class voters.

“We need to show working men and women we understand their anxieties and fears,” she said, “and show that Trump is treating them like just another politician.”

By fiercely contesting a congressional race in the conservative Atlanta suburbs, Democrats had hoped to make an emphatic statement about the weakness of the Republican Party under Mr. Trump. Their candidate, Jon Ossoff, raised about $25 million, mostly in small donations, and assertively courted right-of-center voters with promises of economic development and fiscal restraint.

That vague message, Democrats said Wednesday, was plainly not powerful enough to counter an onslaught of Republican advertising that cast Mr. Ossoff as a puppet of liberal national Democrats, led by Ms. Pelosi, an intensely unpopular figure on the right and a longstanding target of Republican attacks. While Mr. Ossoff made inroads by exploiting Mr. Trump’s unpopularity and a backlash against health care legislation approved in the House, Democrats said they would have to do more to actually win.

Representative Eric Swalwell of California, who is close to party leaders, said Democrats would “crystallize our message on jobs, on health care” in the coming months. The results in Georgia and other special elections, he said, should encourage Democrats to campaign across a huge map of districts. “We need to compete everywhere,” he said.

Representative Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico, the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, met Wednesday morning with a group of lawmakers who have been conferring about economic messaging, according to several people present who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Mr. Luján told the group that his committee would examine the Georgia results for lessons, but he urged the lawmakers to portray the race in positive terms in their public comments, stressing that Democrats have consistently exceeded their historical performance in a series of special elections fought in solidly Republican territory.

It was in the meeting with Mr. Luján that Mr. Cárdenas, a member of the Democratic leadership, brought up Ms. Pelosi’s role in the Georgia race, calling it “the elephant in the room.” Ms. Pelosi was not present.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Cárdenas, while acknowledging his comment, said he had invoked the leader in the context of “what can be done to stand up to those attacks in the future.”

Ms. Pelosi has consistently rejected calls to step down, and there was little indication that her leadership post was at risk. She responded to the election results in a “Dear Colleague” letter to Democratic lawmakers late Wednesday, underscoring the party’s improving performance in conservative areas and saying that “every effort was made to win” in Georgia.

But Ms. Pelosi also said it was time for Democrats to “put forth our message,” and promised an economic one that “we can all embrace and utilize in our districts.”

She did not directly address the sometimes caustic criticism of her leadership from skeptics within the party. Several lawmakers who have opposed her in the past argued that Ms. Pelosi would undermine the party’s candidates for as long as she holds her post.

Representative Seth Moulton of Massachusetts, an open critic of Ms. Pelosi, called the Georgia result “frustrating” and urged a shake-up at the top of the party.

Representative Kathleen Rice of New York told CNN the entire Democratic leadership team should go.

Representative Tim Ryan of Ohio, who tried to unseat Ms. Pelosi as House minority leader late last fall, said she remained a political millstone for Democrats. But Mr. Ryan said the Democratic brand had also become “toxic” in much of the country because voters saw Democrats as “not being able to connect with the issues they care about.”

“Our brand is worse than Trump,” he said.

A top aide to Ms. Pelosi dismissed the idea that her lightning-rod status might have hurt the Democratic effort in Georgia, and pointed out that in some polls the Republican speaker, Paul D. Ryan, is viewed even more dismally.

Any Democratic leader would become a target for the right, said the aide, Drew Hammill, Ms. Pelosi’s deputy chief of staff.

“Republicans blew through millions to keep a ruby red seat and in their

desperate rush to stop the hemorrhaging, they've returned to demonizing the party's strongest fund-raiser and consensus builder," he said. "They don't have Clinton or Obama, so this is what they do."

But in a possible omen, the first Democratic candidate to announce his campaign after the Georgia defeat immediately vowed not to support Ms. Pelosi for leader. Joe Cunningham, a South Carolina lawyer challenging Representative Mark Sanford, said Democrats needed "new leadership now."

Even Democrats who are not openly antagonistic toward Ms. Pelosi acknowledged that a decade of Republican attacks had taken a toll: "It's pretty difficult to undo the demonization of anyone," said Representative Bill Pascrell Jr. of New Jersey.

In some respects, the sniping over the Democrats' campaign message mirrors a larger divide in the Democratic Party, dating to the 2016 presidential primary contest and earlier. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and his supporters have pressed Democrats to embrace a more bluntly populist message, assailing wealthy special interests and endorsing the expansion of social welfare programs, while more moderate Democrats in the party leadership have favored an approach closer to Mr. Ossoff's.

But in four contested special elections in Republican districts — including two, in Kansas and Montana, featuring Sanders-style insurgents — neither method provided the party with a breakthrough victory.

In the absence of a smashing win that might have settled the left-versus-center debate, Democrats may face a longer process of internal deliberation before they settle on an approach that is broadly acceptable in the party.

Part of the Democrats' challenge now is that the jobless rate is low, and many of the districts they are targeting are a lot like the Georgia seat: thriving suburbs filled with voters who have only watched their portfolios grow since Mr. Trump took office.

Even as they smarted from their defeat on Wednesday, Democrats signaled that they intend to compete across a vast area of the country in 2018. Mr. Luján, moving to calm the party, circulated a memo to lawmakers and staff members that declared there was "no doubt that Democrats can take back the House next fall" in the midterm elections. He wrote that six to eight dozen seats held by Republican lawmakers would be easier for Democrats to capture than Georgia's Sixth.

Citing snippets of private polling, Mr. Luján said there were Republican seats in southern Arizona and Florida, northern New Jersey and the Kansas City, Kan., suburbs, where Democratic challengers were already ahead of Republican incumbents.

Democrats need to win 24 Republican-held seats to win control of the House.

On the Republican side, jubilation over the victory in Georgia mixed with lingering unease about the overall political environment. While Ms. Handel defeated Mr. Ossoff by about 10,000 votes and nearly four percentage points, Republican outside groups had to spend $18 million defending a district where the party's candidates had won easily for decades.

And on the same night, a little-watched special election in South Carolina gave Republicans another scare, as an obscure Democrat, Archie Parnell, came within 3,000 votes of capturing a solidly Republican congressional district, with voter turnout far behind the Georgia race.

Nick Everhart, a Republican strategist in Ohio, said the party should not allow its relief at having kept Democrats at bay to turn into complacency. Up to this point, he said, Republicans have been beating Democrats only on solidly red turf.

"To pretend that there are not serious enthusiasm-gap issues with the G.O.P. base and, more crucially, independents fleeing, is missing the lessons that need to be learned before truly competitive seats are on the board," Mr. Everhart said.

Still, the immediate aftermath of the Georgia election was plainly tougher on the Democratic side, as the party endured a fourth special election that ended with a better-than-usual showing by a defeated Democrat. That pattern may put Democrats on track to gain power in the 2018 elections, but 17 months is a long wait for a party so hungry to win.

Axelrod : Georgia 6th loss isn't the death knell for Democrats

David Axelrod is CNN's senior political commentator and host of the podcast "The Axe Files." He was senior adviser to President Barack Obama and chief strategist for the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

*(CNN)*The facile headlines the morning after the Georgia 6th donnybrook wrote themselves:

Republicans triumphant! Democrats in disarray!

Politics ain't horseshoes. A loss is a loss and Democrats lost a race they had hoped to win Tuesday night. Republicans escaped a disaster that would have sent tremors through Capitol Hill. The shaky effort to scrap Obamacare escaped a potentially deadly setback, as a loss would have further shaken timorous Senate Republicans at a critical juncture.

Yet the deeper meaning of Tuesday's results is more nuanced. Democrats should be disappointed but not despondent, having lost a race in which they invested great hope and resources into Jon Ossoff. Republicans, and an embattled President, should be relieved but not exultant, having elected Karen Handel and holding on in a district the party has dominated for four decades.

There were some reasons for Democratic optimism going in. Donald Trump carried Georgia's 6th Congressional District by just a hair in 2016. The district's upscale, highly educated voters were more resistant to the bombastic President than his hardscrabble base.

Yet, despite the fervent desire of national Democrats to turn the race into a referendum on Trump, the Georgia 6th proved to be fool's gold; alluring because of its makeup yet, still, at its core, a conservative district.

Ossoff's best -- and now it's clear -- only chance to win was in the April "jungle primary" when he was the consensus choice of Democrats on the ballot with more than 10 Republicans. Political pros in both parties said then that if Ossoff failed to win outright in the first round, capturing less than 50.1% while Republicans squabbled among themselves, he would likely fail in a runoff, when the GOP machine could coalesce around one candidate and train all their artillery on him.

Handel was not a stellar candidate, but as a former officeholder and longtime community presence, she was a comfortable choice for Republicans. She also was the beneficiary of a hellacious anti-Ossoff campaign that painted the moderate newbie as a spear-carrier for Nancy Pelosi and the left.

It was enough to fend off the 30-year-old, who, buoyed by online donations, became the best funded House candidate in history.

The Republicans hung on but not without lingering questions. A 4 point win in a district they have customarily carried by 20 should be a cause for concern.

Their less noticed and even narrower victory Tuesday in South Carolina for the seat vacated by Trump Budget Director Mick Mulvaney should be even more alarming to the GOP.

Absent the monumental effort the GOP and supporting oligarchs waged on Handel's behalf, increased Democratic enthusiasm and turnout turned an expected blowout into a barn-burner. The winner, Ralph Norman, won by an even slimmer margin than Handel in a district Mulvaney carried by 20 last fall, defeating the relatively unknown and underfunded Archie Parnell.

If I were the GOP, which now has won four special elections since the fall in Republican strongholds by significantly smaller margins than are customary, I would be concerned.

Democrats are glum. Younger party leaders in Congress are grumbling at Pelosi and their Old Guard leaders. The Bernie Sanders left is all over moderates, charging that Ossoff was too tepid -- a foolish argument, considering the nature of the district.

The results warrant little of this.

Despite their disappointment, Democrats should find some encouragement in the weak performance of Republicans in the four House specials that were all decidedly home games for the GOP. Instead, the party should be focusing on 2018, and the 23 Republican-held House seats in districts where Hillary Clinton bested Trump last year.

While it would take a larger wave than is evident today, a Democratic sweep of these seats would land the party close to the 24 it needs to take control next year.

That won't happen unless Democrats recruit, support and nominate candidates whose roots

are deeper and messages more clear and who are a better fit for their districts than Ossoff and Parnell. And internecine warfare between the Bernie wing and more moderate factions will continue to be a sideshow that could limit Democratic gains in the House.

But Tuesday's results should be neither discouraging to Democrats nor intoxicating for Republicans.

They point to a 2018 campaign for the House that is as likely to be competitive today as it was before the votes from Georgia were counted.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Blinder : Congressional Maneuvers in the Dark

Alan S. Blinder

At the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked what sort of government the framers had created for the new nation. "A republic, if you can keep it," he replied.

Yes, democracy was a grand and radical experiment back then. America was the first country of the modern era to put the idea into practice. It would be government by the people, following the rule of law, not the whims of a monarch or dictator.

So far, we have kept it. But Franklin's warning was prophetic. Democracy has needed defense many times, both here and elsewhere. Lately, the world's oldest democracy has taken a few body blows.

It started in February 2016, when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) decided that President Obama was not entitled to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court because his presidency had less than a year to go. Oh, really? Where does the Constitution say that? (Nowhere.) Franklin probably turned in his grave.

It got worse during the 2016 presidential election, when the Russians intervened massively to try to elect Donald Trump. Regardless of whether it succeeded, the Russian mischief constituted a blatant attack on American democracy. The nation went to war in 1812 over far less.

In the coming months, we may learn the extent to which Mr. Trump and his surrogates collaborated with Mr. Putin and his—unless the president succeeds in firing everyone investigating the matter. But we already know this much: Despite swearing an oath to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," President Trump has not lifted a finger to get at the truth.

That alone is dereliction of duty. Worse yet, Mr. Trump has covered for and laughed with the Russians, has fired the FBI director, and would prefer we believe that the interferences in the 2016 election were the work of "somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds." Despite all this and more, Speaker Paul Ryan defends him thus: "He's just new to this."

Which brings me to health-care legislation. Mr. Trump is new to that, too.

On May 4, Mr. Ryan jammed the American Health Care Act through the House on the second try. He did so in a great rush, anxious to get a floor vote before the Congressional Budget Office had a chance to estimate the plan's likely effects.

Mr. Ryan knew the CBO estimate would be bad news—he had seen their score of the bill's abortive first version—and indeed it was. When CBO published its estimate, it projected, among other things, that some 23 million fewer Americans would have health insurance within a decade, compared with ObamaCare. That estimate was down from 24 million for the earlier version, and was apparently enough to get some "moderate" Republicans on board.

Mr. Trump was correct last week when he called the House bill "mean." Of course, he previously called it "great."

Perhaps the Senate bill will whittle the 23 million "losers" down to 22 million or 21 million. Nobody knows—not even most Republican senators, and certainly not any Democratic senators. And especially not the public, which holds an extremely dim view of the House-passed bill. A recent Quinnipiac poll found respondents disapproving of the Republican health-care plan by 62% to 17%.

America is supposed to have open legislative processes, including such quaint practices as public hearings, exposure to expert critiques, debates in Congress and amendments. That's what democracies do, but what Messrs. Trump, McConnell and Ryan apparently disdain. Perhaps remembering Justice Louis Brandeis's observation that sunshine is the best disinfectant, they are growing the Senate bill in the dark.

It's amazing that we don't know more about what's in the bill, for Congress normally leaks like a sieve. But if, as reported, Mr. McConnell plans to jam a bill through the Senate this month and then get the House to adopt the Senate's version, the Senate bill must hew at least modestly close to the House version.

That would mean depriving tens of millions of Americans of health insurance, eviscerating the ObamaCare protections for people with pre-existing conditions, and making draconian cuts in Medicaid. In one particularly mean touch, the Medicaid cuts in the House bill come close to matching—dollar for dollar—the tax cuts, most of which go to upper-bracket taxpayers. That's about as close to robbing the poor to pay the rich as you can get.

Well, almost. Most of us think of Medicaid as providing health insurance to the poor, which it does. But few people realize that more Medicaid spending goes for older and disabled adults, especially for long-term care—which is so expensive that few middle-class families can afford it. Did someone say, "Let them eat cake"?

Benjamin Franklin would be worried. You should be, too.

Mr. Blinder is a professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton University and a former vice chairman of the Federal Reserve.

The Washington Post

Senate Republicans set to release health-care bill, but divisions remain (UNE)

https://www.facebook.com/eilperin

Senate Republicans on Thursday plan to release a health-care bill that would curtail federal Medicaid funding, repeal taxes on the wealthy and eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood as part of an effort to fulfill a years-long promise to undo Barack Obama's signature health-care law.

The bill is an attempt to strike a compromise between existing law and a bill passed by the House in May as Republicans struggle to advance their vision for the country's health-care system even though they now control both chambers of Congress and the White House.

The Senate proposal largely mirrors the House measure with significant differences, according to a discussion draft circulating Wednesday among aides and lobbyists. While the House legislation would peg federal insurance subsidies to age, the Senate bill would link them to income, as the Affordable Care Act does. The Senate proposal would cut off expanded Medicaid funding for states more gradually than the House bill but would enact deeper long-term cuts to the health-care program for low-income Americans. It also would eliminate House language aimed at prohibiting federally subsidized health plans from covering abortions, a provision that may run afoul of complex Senate budget rules.

But on the eve of the bill's release, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) faced the prospect of an open revolt from key conservative and moderate GOP senators, whose concerns he has struggled to balance in recent weeks. Republicans familiar with the effort said Senate leaders have more work to do to secure the 50 votes needed to pass the measure, with Vice President Pence set to cast the tiebreaking vote, from the pool of 52 GOP senators. No Democrats are expected to support the bill.

Republican aides stressed that the plan is likely to undergo more changes to secure the votes needed for passage, but there were major concerns Wednesday from senators on opposite ends of the GOP spectrum.

"My main concern is I promised voters that I would repeal — vote to repeal Obamacare. And everything I hear sounds like Obamacare-lite," said Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.).

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.), whose state expanded Medicaid and has been pushing for a more gradual unwinding of that

initiative than many conservatives prefer, said she is waiting to scrutinize what is released but has not seen anything yet that would make her drop her concerns with the proposal.

“Up to this point, I don’t have any new news — tomorrow we will see it definitively — that would cause me to change that sentiment,” she said.

Like the House bill, the Senate measure is expected to make big changes to Medicaid, the program that insures about 74 million elderly and lower-income Americans and was expanded in most states under the ACA. In effect, the revisions would reduce federal spending on the program.

The Senate measure would transform Medicaid from an open-ended entitlement to one in which federal funding would be distributed to states on a per-capita basis. The Senate measure would also seek to phase out the program’s expansion — although at a more gradual rate than the House version.

Yet the Senate bill is expected go further than the House version in its approach to cutting Medicaid funding in the future. In 2025, the measure would tie federal spending on the program to an even slower growth index than the one used in the House bill. That move could prompt states to reduce the size of their Medicaid programs.

That provision, a nod to conservative lawmakers led by Sen. Patrick J. Toomey (R-Pa.), risks alienating moderates, including Capito and Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), who also represents a state that expanded Medicaid under the ACA. Some Republicans worry that such a move would force states to cut services or coverage, potentially leaving millions of low-income people without sufficient health care.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said on June 20 that Americans will have "plenty of time" to look at the health-care bill before it goes to the Senate floor for debate. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said on June 20 that Americans will have "plenty of time" to look at the health-care bill. (The Washington Post)

(The Washington Post)

The growth rate that is applied to Medicaid spending going forward has major implications, said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine). “That inflater is critical, because it translates into billions of dollars over time,” she said.

Portman and Capito have also been pushing for the inclusion of a $45 billion fund to treat and prevent opioid addiction. As of early Wednesday afternoon, the opioid money was not included in McConnell’s proposal, according to a top GOP senator and Senate aide familiar with the discussions.

“I don’t think there is right now,” Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) said when asked whether the legislation includes a distinct opioid fund. “It might have to be considered separately.”

But Portman and Capito, like all senators, will have a chance to introduce amendments to the bill when it heads to the Senate floor, which McConnell said is likely to happen next week. This process will allow senators to draw attention to the causes they have championed and potentially change the final bill.

Moderates who are on the fence about whether to support the Obamacare overhaul are likely to be pleased at the bill’s approach to insurance subsidies because they would be based on financial need, potentially preserving coverage for more people who got insurance under the ACA.

Subsidies are currently available to Americans earning between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty level. Starting in 2020, that threshold would be lowered to 350 percent under the Senate bill — but anyone below that line could get the subsidies if they’re not eligible for Medicaid.

That provision, said Larry Levitt, senior vice president for special initiatives at the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, would be “a real benefit to poor people in states that don’t expand Medicaid.”

In a move that will please the health-care industry, the draft also proposes repealing all of the ACA taxes except for its “Cadillac tax” on high-cost health plans in language similar to the House version. Senators had previously toyed with the idea of keeping some of the ACA’s taxes.

It would also eliminate Medicaid reimbursements for Planned Parenthood for one year. Federal law already prevents taxpayer funding to pay for abortions except to save the life of the woman or in the case of rape or incest. But some Republicans want to ban all federal funding for Planned Parenthood, which also provides health services such as birth control, because their clinics provide abortion services.

Like the House measure, the Senate bill would eliminate two central requirements of the current health-care law: that individuals provide proof of insurance when filing their annual tax returns and that companies with 50 or more employees provide health coverage for their workers.

In a move that is critical to insurers, the Senate measure would continue to fund for two years cost-sharing subsidies that help 7 million Americans with ACA plans. House Republicans have challenged the legality of the $7 billion in subsidies — which help cover consumers’ deductibles and copays — in court, and insurers have warned that they will have to increase premiums dramatically next year unless the federal government commits to continuing the payments.

McConnell has told Republican senators that he wants to maintain protections for people with preexisting conditions under the law. But it was not clear to some lawmakers Wednesday what that would entail.

“I haven’t seen the draft yet. I like the idea of preexisting conditions being more firmly clarified,” Portman said.

Paul criticized GOP leaders for potentially keeping some of the ACA’s “most expensive regulations,” which he says are the primary drivers of higher premiums.

“It may well be that prices don’t come down at all,” he said.

But the Senate proposal may change rules for waivers that states can file with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services that could allow them to potentially scale back some of these federal mandates.

While the details of McConnell’s proposal are expected to be made public Thursday, much of focus in recent weeks has been on the process used to draft the bill.

Democrats and even some Republicans have been critical of Senate GOP leaders for crafting the proposal behind closed doors without hearings and consideration of the legislation by the relevant committees.

Your daily guide to the energy and environment debate.

Several GOP senators have expressed concern about moving quickly to a vote before they fully understand how it would impact health insurance markets and their constituents.

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) said that in addition to reading the bill, “I’ll also want to get full input from constituencies in Wisconsin.”

Given that there may be just a week between the bill being posted and a final vote, he added, “I find it hard to believe we’ll have enough time.”

The Washington Post

Editorial : Republicans’ health-care hypocrisy is on full display

REMEMBER WHEN Obamacare was written “hastily,” “behind closed doors” in “secret” negotiations, so that Democrats could “jam” an unpopular health-care bill through Congress? Remember when this showed that they “didn’t care what was in it” and that they had betrayed the “trust” of the American people? Remember when “the issue of health reform” was “too important to not take the time to get it right”?

Republicans are hoping you do not remember, or that you are willing to forget now that the shoe is on the other foot. Led by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), they are barrelling toward a vote next week on a bill that as of Wednesday afternoon they had not released to the public — eliciting expressions of concern about the rushed process even from Republicans.

Criticism after criticism that Republicans have lobbed at Democrats over the years about how the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed apply to a far greater extent to the health-care bill the GOP leadership has been drafting covertly.

Major national and political news as it breaks.

Whereas various versions of the bill Democrats wrote in 2009 and 2010 went through committees , where Republicans could offer feedback and amendments, the Senate has held no hearings and no committee votes on the bill the Republicans are writing. Whereas the Democrats spent weeks trying to bargain with Republicans on health-care reform, Republicans have made no such attempt at good-faith negotiation as they have sought to reform the ACA. Whereas Senate Democrats held 25 days of debate on Obamacare, the Republicans have reportedly budgeted themselves about a week between the release of the bill’s text and the vote on it. With the Congressional Budget

Office unable to release its analysis of any GOP plan until next week, there might be only a handful of days between publication of the official scorekeepers' estimates of what the bill would do to Americans' health care and the Senate vote.

Republicans respond that the bill will be open to amendment on the floor and that health-care policy has been the subject of public debate for years now, obviating the need for legislative transparency. If that is so, then the Republicans have lost the debate. Polls show that the GOP repeal-and-replace effort is plumbing new depths of unpopularity. This should be unsurprising to any dispassionate observer of the Republican initiative. The House passed a bill that even President Trump reportedly described as "mean." It would fund a large tax cut by scaling back health assistance, resulting in 23 million more people uninsured in a decade, with the pain concentrated on poorer and older people. Because of the Senate Republicans' opaque process, it is still unclear whether their bill will end up as cruel. Reports from inside, however, suggest it might be even tougher on Medicaid, the health-care program for the poor and near-poor.

Republicans can hide their bill, for now. But they will own the consequences.

The New York Times — Abortion Adds Obstacle as Republicans Plan to Unveil Health Bill (UNE)

Robert Pear and Thomas Kaplan

WASHINGTON — Abortion flared up Wednesday as the latest hot-button issue to complicate passage of a bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, which Senate Republican leaders hope to unveil on Thursday and pass next week.

The repeal bill approved last month by the House would bar the use of federal tax credits to help purchase insurance plans that include coverage of abortion. But senators said that provision might have to be jettisoned from their version because of complicated Senate rules that Republicans are using to expedite passage of the bill and avoid a filibuster.

If that provision is dropped, a bill that has already elicited deep misgivings among moderate Republicans — and stiff resistance from Democrats, health care providers and patient advocacy groups — could also generate concern among abortion opponents, as well as conservative lawmakers.

Further complicating the measure's prospects, insurance companies, which took a leading role in the health care fights of 1993-94 and 2009-10 but have been conspicuously quiet this year, released a blistering letter objecting to Republican plans to remake Medicaid and cut its funding.

The changes being considered in Congress could "amount to a 25 percent shortfall in covering the actual cost of providing care to our nation's neediest citizens," the top executives of 10 insurance companies wrote this week. "These amounts spell deep cuts, not state flexibilities, in Medicaid."

As senators struggle to develop a health care bill, their handiwork appears to be too moderate for some Senate conservatives and too conservative for some Senate moderates. The latest version, without the abortion-coverage prohibition and with steep Medicaid cuts, may prove unacceptable to some in both camps. To pass it, Senate leaders can afford to lose only two Republican votes of the 52 in the chamber.

Republican senators got a glimpse Wednesday of the highlights of the bill, which was drafted in secret by the majority leader, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, and top aides. White House officials were granted a formal briefing, which risked irking many senators who had yet to see the actual bill.

The House abortion provision has sweeping implications because many health plans subsidized under the Affordable Care Act include coverage for abortion services. The provision has encountered outspoken opposition from officials in states like Oregon, where most health plans on the public insurance exchange cover abortion.

But senators said the provision might have to be dropped for a more prosaic reason: It may not comply with the Senate rules that Republicans are using to speed the health care bill through the Senate.

The bill is scheduled to go to the Senate floor next week under these procedures, which limit debate and preclude a Democratic filibuster.

"It's one of the problems we have to work with," Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah and the chairman of the Finance Committee, said of the abortion issue. "We're not quite sure how that's going to be resolved."

Mr. McConnell is determined to get a vote on the bill by the end of next week, before a break for the Fourth of July holiday, but he still does not have enough committed votes to ensure passage.

Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, made clear on Wednesday that he was not on board with the Republican bill.

"I'm still hoping we reach impasse, and we actually go back to the idea we originally started with, which is repealing Obamacare," Mr. Paul said, adding, "I'm not for replacing Obamacare with Obamacare lite."

The House bill and the Senate version, like the Affordable Care Act, would provide tens of billions of dollars in tax credits to help people pay insurance premiums.

The federal government is expected to spend more than $30 billion this year on tax credits to help lower- and middle-income people pay premiums. The Senate bill would provide more assistance to lower-income people than the House bill, which bases tax credits on a person's age.

The Senate bill would also repeal most of the taxes imposed by the Affordable Care Act. It would delay the effective date of a tax on high-cost employer-sponsored health coverage, but Republicans plan to offer an amendment next week to eliminate this "Cadillac tax," which is opposed by labor unions and employers.

Senators Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Susan Collins of Maine, both Republicans, said they understood that the House restrictions on the use of tax credits for insurance covering abortion had encountered parliamentary problems.

"What I heard earlier from the parliamentarian is they didn't think it would pass" muster under Senate rules, Mr. Tillis said.

Mr. Tillis and Ms. Collins said they understood that Senate Republican leaders were hoping to devise some kind of workaround to address concerns of anti-abortion lawmakers. But it was not clear whether those anti-abortion lawmakers would be satisfied with such a plan, which could involve separate legislation.

Republicans have been promising to repeal the health law ever since it was signed by President Barack Obama in 2010. On Wednesday, in the final hours before the Senate repeal bill was to be unveiled, members of Congress, consumer groups and health care executives engaged in frenetic advocacy in hopes of shaping the bill.

Women's groups and at least two moderate Republicans, Ms. Collins and Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, continued to object to a provision of Mr. McConnell's bill that would cut off funds for Planned Parenthood.

In a letter to Mr. McConnell on Wednesday, more than two dozen House members in the conservative Republican Study Committee listed several parts of the House bill they view as crucial, including cutting funds to Planned Parenthood and restricting the use of the tax credits. The bill, they wrote, fulfills "an important conservative commitment to promote life and protect the unborn."

Leaders of the 10 insurance companies told Mr. McConnell that proposed caps on federal Medicaid spending would cause "an enormous cost shift to the states," which could force them to raise taxes, reduce benefits, cut payments to health care providers or eliminate coverage for some beneficiaries. Among those signing the letter were top executives of AmeriHealth Caritas, Molina Healthcare, Blue Shield of California and Healthfirst, in New York.

But Senator John Kennedy, Republican of Louisiana, said the Medicaid provisions were one of the bill's chief attractions for him.

"In my state," Mr. Kennedy said, "we are now spending 47 percent of our budget on Medicaid. That's up from 23 percent in 2008. It's crowding out money for universities and roads and public safety and coastal restoration, and it just keeps climbing."

Even senators who might support the legislation said they did not want to be rushed.

Asked how he felt about the prospect of having a vote on the bill a week after its release, Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, said, "I feel terrible about it."

Senator Ron Johnson, Republican of Wisconsin, said, "I need the

information, I need to hear from constituents, and that's going to take some time."

Debate on the Senate bill will be shaped by an analysis from the Congressional Budget Office, which will estimate the impact on federal spending and the number of people without health insurance. Under the House bill, the office said, the number of uninsured would be 23 million higher than under the Affordable Care Act in 2026. And for some older Americans and sick people, it said, premiums and out-of-pocket costs could be significantly higher.

The Washington Post

Senate Republicans' Support for Health Bill Wavers (UNE)

Stephanie Armour, Kristina Peterson and Louise Radnofsky

Senate Republicans' plan to pass legislation next week to overhaul the health-care system hung in the balance Wednesday, as at least a half-dozen GOP lawmakers wavered and balked at the push for a quick vote.

The opposition is coming both from conservative Republican senators, who believe the proposal doesn't repeal enough of the Affordable Care Act, as well as GOP centrists, who are balking at steep cuts to Medicaid that would leave more people uninsured. The situation is fluid and could change, but the political double bind leaves GOP leaders with little room to maneuver.

Lawmakers on both ends of the GOP spectrum are also increasingly joining Democrats in criticizing the lack of transparency and rapid-fire timeline for a vote. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) plans to release draft legislation Thursday morning; many lawmakers said they hadn't seen the bill's text as of Wednesday afternoon.

Some Republicans, including Sen. Ron Johnson (R., Wis.), are calling the timetable too rushed to ensure their support.

"I would find it hard to believe I will have enough time," Mr. Johnson said. "I've made leadership well aware of the fact that I need information to make a final decision, and if I don't have the information to justify a yes vote, I won't be voting yes."

At least 50 of the chamber's 52 Republicans must back the legislation for it to pass because no Democrats are expected to vote for it. If the chamber splits 50-50, Vice President Mike Pence would cast the tiebreaking vote.

The Senate deliberations are taking on an added urgency as some insurers said they would withdraw from the health law's marketplaces next year.

Anthem Inc. said Wednesday it would exit the marketplaces in Wisconsin and Indiana, while nonprofit MDwise said it would leave the Indiana exchange. Those moves may leave four Indiana counties at risk of having no exchange insurers in 2018, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on health care. But foundation researchers cautioned the outlook remains unclear.

Senators said they expect an estimate of the bill's cost and coverage impact from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office by Monday at the latest.

The bill seeks to deliver on a Republican campaign promise to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, and replace it with a system conservatives said would be more effective. GOP leaders haven't publicly disclosed the bill's contents, but it is expected to include deep cuts to Medicaid and a freeze of the program's expansion under the 2010 health law.

Under the Senate version, people without employer-provided insurance could qualify for subsidies that would be based on income, age and health costs in their area, people familiar with the discussions said. It could also lower the income eligibility for subsidies, meaning fewer people would likely be eligible than under the law now. It also will likely diverge from the House bill by keeping some insurance regulations, although states could likely roll them back using federal waivers.

Senate GOP leaders have included provisions likely to land support from conservatives, people familiar with the discussions said, including a slower growth rate for Medicaid spending, starting in 2025, as compared with the House version.

Still, a number of conservative GOP senators expressed frustration and reservations on Wednesday.

"I promised voters I would vote to repeal Obamacare, and everything I hear sounds like Obamacare lite," said Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.), coming out of a Senate GOP lunch where details of the bill were discussed.

At least four Republican senators—Mike Lee of Utah, Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Ted Cruz of Texas and Mr. Paul—already believe conservatives made significant concessions in the House bill. A Senate bill in which conservatives are likely to lose more ground would likely be unacceptable, one conservative strategist said.

Beyond the substance, several senators said they were frustrated because they would apparently have a week to review the bill before leadership asks for a vote, raising the possibility that the vote could be pushed into July.

"The whole process is not satisfactory," Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.) said. "I feel terrible about it."

Mr. Lee, who hosted a Facebook live event Tuesday, said he hasn't seen the bill even though he is a member of a Senate GOP working group charged with crafting it.

"It's not being written by us," he said. "It's apparently been written by a small handful of staffers in the Republican leadership in the Senate."

Centrist GOP senators, meanwhile, said they would be concerned if the bill includes overly sharp spending reductions to Medicaid. The bill is expected to begin a cutoff of federal funding for new enrollees under the law's Medicaid expansion in three years, starting in 2021, one year later than the House bill, though the provision could change.

Republicans senators, including Rob Portman of Ohio and Susan Collins of Maine, had hoped for a longer delay on Medicaid. They also had hoped to see $45 billion in funding for treating opioid addiction in the legislation, and several people close to the drafting of the bill said that isn't currently included.

Some lawmakers said it wasn't clear whether the bill would include a provision that would effectively defund Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Ms. Collins said if the bill included that measure, she and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R., Alaska) would offer an amendment reversing it.

Senate Democrats criticized the Republicans' closed process for crafting the bill and the substance of the legislation.

"You've got a bunch of privileged members of Congress that get government health insurance from taxpayers and they are meeting behind closed doors to find a way to take insurance from a lot of families where the parents are working," Sen. Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio) said. "It's just morally reprehensible."

Republican senators' frustration is arising in part because both conservative and centrist Republicans believe they are on the losing end of the weekslong talks.

Conservative observers feel the centrists prevailed in several of the tug-of-wars, including the battles over Medicaid and insurance regulations, according to lawmakers, strategists and lobbyists. At the same time, centrists dispute that the Medicaid arrangements are sufficient to meet the needs of their states.

To sway conservatives, Mr. McConnell has been telling them that Democrats could wind up working with centrist Republican Senators to draft a less conservative health bill if they fail to support the GOP legislation, a strategist close to the Republican leadership said.

The strength of the market is waning as insurers pull out of the marketplace. And that is underlining the importance of whether the health bill will include billions of dollars in funding for market stabilization, as well as an appropriation for the law's "cost-sharing reduction" payments to insurers, which help them offset subsidies to low-income consumers. Insurers have feared the abrupt cutoff of the cost-sharing payments.

An appropriation for those payments was expected to be in the bill, a senior administration official and GOP strategists said, but by Wednesday evening it wasn't certain it would withstand procedural challenges. Other sources said the funding would be pursued in the fall when Congress votes to reauthorize funding for Children's Health Insurance Program or in stand-alone legislation that would need to be passed by the chamber.

The funding is especially attractive to centrist GOP senators hailing from states with especially fragile markets, and could become the basis of any Democratic bill seeking to suppl

Senate GOP Bill Would Change Obamacare, Not Repeal It

Russell Berman

The health-care bill Senate Republicans plan to unveil on Thursday likely will make substantial changes to Medicaid and cut taxes for wealthy Americans and businesses. It will eliminate mandates and relax regulations on insurance plans, and it will reduce the federal government's role in health care.

What it won't do, however, is actually repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Lost in the roiling debate over health care over the last several weeks is that Republicans have all but given up on their longstanding repeal-and-replace pledge. The slogan lives on in the rhetoric used by many GOP lawmakers and the Trump White House but not in the legislation the party is advancing. That was true when House Republicans passed the American Health Care Act last month, which rolled back key parts of Obamacare but was not a full repeal. And it is even more true of the bill the Senate has drafted in secret, which reportedly will stick closer to the underlying structure of the law.

"We're amending Obamacare. We're not killing it," a frustrated Jason Pye of the conservative group FreedomWorks told me earlier this month as the murky outlines of the Senate proposal were beginning to emerge.

Like the House bill, the Senate plan is expected to repeal the ACA's employer and individual insurance mandates and most if not all of the tax increases Democrats levied to pay for new programs and benefits. But the Senate bill likely will only begin a years-long phase-out of the ACA's Medicaid expansion in 2020 rather than end it as the House measure does.

The Senate also is expected to include more generous tax credits than the House bill that more closely resemble the system already in place under Obamacare. But the funding levels would still be lower than the current law. And according to *Axios*, the bill would allow states to opt out of some ACA insurance regulations, but it would do so by loosening existing waivers within the current law rather than follow the House in creating a new waiver system. And the Senate proposal would require that states adhere to more of Obamacare's regulations than the House bill.

Senate Majority Leader McConnell has quietly abandoned the language of "repeal-and-replace" that his office originated seven years in the immediate aftermath of the ACA's enactment. In more than a dozen speeches on health care that McConnell has delivered on the Senate floor since the House passed its bill in early May, he hasn't uttered the word "repeal" a single time, according to transcripts provided by the majority leader's office. Nor has he repeated his own pledge to rip out Obamacare "root and branch." "We're going to make every effort to pass a bill that dramatically changes the current health care law," McConnell told reporters on Tuesday, setting a new standard for the bill Republicans plan to release on Thursday.

"We're going to make every effort to pass a bill that dramatically changes the current health care law."

When the year started, legislation leaving Obamacare substantially in place would have been dead on arrival with hardliners in the House and Senate, who demanded that party leaders expand on a bill that former President Barack Obama vetoed in 2015. That measure did not fully repeal the ACA either, bowing to Senate budget rules limiting how much of the law Republicans could scrap without a filibuster-proof 60 votes. But it eliminated the tax credits and subsidies undergirding the law's insurance exchanges along with its tax increases and mandates. And with Republicans now in control of both Congress and the White House, conservatives in the House Freedom Caucus this spring began pushing the leadership to go further by repealing Obamacare's core consumer protections guaranteeing the coverage of essential health benefits and prohibiting insurers from charging higher rates to people with preexisting conditions.

The deal that ultimately allowed the AHCA to pass the House was an under-appreciated turning point in the health-care debate. The concession that Speaker Paul Ryan and a few key moderates made to the Freedom Caucus was to allow states to opt out of some of Obamacare's insurance regulations, most crucially on equal treatment for pre-existing conditions. But the concession that conservative lawmakers and outside groups made in return was just as significant: They agreed to back off their demand for full repeal and endorse—or at least not fight—a bill that fell far short of that goal.

"While this legislation does not fully repeal Obamacare, it's an important step in keeping that promise to lower healthcare costs," the Freedom Caucus said in its statement upon passage of the AHCA. It was a message echoed by outside groups like FreedomWorks, Heritage Action, and the Club for Growth, who agreed to drop their opposition to the bill, a move that gave Republicans additional cover to vote for it. Conservatives had embraced an incrementalist approach to Obamacare. The new standard they adopted for health-care legislation was not whether it eliminated the Affordable Care Act but whether it would lower premiums for most consumers.

One key question for McConnell is whether the most outspoken conservatives in his caucus—Senators Rand Paul of Kentucky, Ted Cruz of Texas, and Mike Lee of Utah—will judge the Senate bill by that more modest baseline. Republicans can lose no more than two votes to secure passage, and a group of moderate senators is proving just as difficult for party leaders to nail down. To this point, Paul has been the most critical of the GOP approach and the most likely to oppose the proposal from the right. The House bill, he complained, already kept 90 percent of Obamacare's subsidies. "If this gets any more subsidies in it, it may well be equal to what we have in Obamacare. So it really wouldn't be repeal," Paul said on Tuesday, according to *Bloomberg*. Even so, the Kentucky conservative wouldn't rule out supporting the bill until he read the text.

Cruz and Lee have participated in the Senate process as members of the 13-man working group, and aides have said both have bought into McConnell's incremental approach. But the two have each complained about the emerging draft in recent days, either on the substance or the top-down, secretive process used to write the bill. "We're not there yet," Cruz said Tuesday on Fox News. "The current draft doesn't do nearly enough to lower premiums."

The Congressional Budget Office projected that in states that opted out of Obamacare's insurance requirements under the waivers allowed in the House bill, average premiums would drop significantly. But the tradeoff is that people with preexisting conditions would face sharply higher costs or be priced out of insurance entirely. Conservatives have argued that the high cost of adhering to the ACA's minimum coverage requirements has forced insurers to raise premiums in order to make a profit.

Conservative activists briefly held out hope that the health-care bill would move further to the right in the Senate, buoyed by efforts by Cruz and Lee to have Republicans override parliamentary rulings limiting how much of Obamacare they could repeal through the budget reconciliation process. But party leaders never seriously considered that option, which moderate Republicans were likely to oppose.

In recent weeks, conservatives have instead focused on demanding that the Senate preserve—or deepen—the reforms to Medicaid in the House bill while still repealing all of Obamacare's tax hikes. "It is clear that significant portions of the Republican Party have no intention of actually repealing Obamacare despite campaigning on that objective for years," Mike Needham, CEO of Heritage Action, said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Conservatives will evaluate legislative language when it becomes available, looking particularly at whether the legislation empowers states to get out of the onerous insurance mandates imposed by Obamacare, maintains and improves the House's Medicaid reforms, and repeals Obamacare's stifling taxes."

Make no mistake, Republicans aren't merely tinkering around the edges of the health-care system, or Obamacare. The Senate proposal that will come out on Thursday will significantly alter the federal funding of Medicaid and, in all likelihood, would result in millions fewer Americans having health insurance over the next decade, as projected by the CBO. And while they won't be excited by the bill, conservative senators and activists might well come around to support it. They'd vote for the plan as a step in the right direction, a weakening of Obamacare. But like McConnell, they won't be calling it something that it's not: repeal.