

The Insidious Wiles of Foreign Influence: Trump, Bin Salman, and Netanyahu

Even if the Saudi monarchy or Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular did not murder journalist Jamal Khashoggi, that regime is an especially evil one in both its domestic and international conduct. To see that, one need only consider the horrendous Saudi war against the people of Yemen, with the backing of the U.S. government starting with Barack Obama. That war, with its merciless killing of defenseless thousands and its inevitable benefits to al-Qaeda, is just the latest in a series Saudi atrocities.

Predictably, Donald Trump wants it all ways. He's made the obligatory mild critical remarks at the same time as he floated his "theory" that Khashoggi's death may have been carried out by rogue agents. But since that explanation, along with the "interrogation gone wrong" alternative, is hardly likely, Trump seems to be banking on his warm relationship with and confidence in the credibility of King Salman and the crown prince to reassure us. Actually, Trump has two things on his mind: arms sales and Iran.

He believes, first, that he can make the U.S. economy vibrant by being the country's arms-trafficker-in-chief. He can throw multibillion-dollar figures around like confetti all day, but that he can't erase the fact that a thriving arms industry is not the key to real and general prosperity. Quite the contrary, its products either destroy lives and wealth or rust. Real prosperity is not captured by aggregate numbers, whether they refer to military contractors' profits, stock prices, or GDP. Real prosperity means regular people having increasingly easier access to the goods and services *they believe* will enhance their lives. As long as the laws of physics operate, scarcity — though, thanks to technology and innovation, not its severity — will be with us. So if people are devoting resources to making warplanes, killer drones, and bombs, they aren't making things that you and I actually use. Arms-industry fatcats and their workers will make money, but they could be making money in ways that actually serve consumers instead of murderous and oppressive dictators, monarchs, presidents, and prime ministers.

Trump is wrong: this is not about the economy. His position is a dangerous mix of economic illiteracy fueled by nationalism and a hegemonic geopolitical vision according to which Iran is throttled and Israel is enabled, with Saudi Arabia as a beneficiary. Those objectives serve neither most Americans nor the rest of the world's people.

The old admonition about permanent and entangling alliances still holds. As often as it's been quoted, it's worth quoting again — Washington's Farewell Address, that is. Despite all its qualifications, Washington's essential message is clear:

Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. [Emphasis added.]

While steering clear of alliances is good advice, we may still question why the American regime has, beginning long before Trump, chosen one government for an ally over another. Why, for example, is the U.S. government close to Saudi Arabia rather than Iran? It certainly is not the case that the former is more liberal than the latter. That would be a laughable proposition. To pick a random test, how close are centers of Riyadh and Tehran to the nearest synagogues? I wouldn't want to live in either place, but if those were my only choices, please give me Tehran. As for Iran's allegedly creeping hegemony in the Middle East, check your premises. George W. Bush made Iran influential in Iraq by invading and knocking off Iran's nemesis Saddam Hussein. (Iraq invaded and waged a long war, using chemical weapons, against Iran in the 1980s — with U.S. help — not vice versa.) Then Bush and Obama brought Iran closer to Syria by their continued war in Iraq, giving birth of the Islamic State, and Obama's and Hillary Clinton's declaring open season on Bashar al-Assad after the putative civil war broke out. Iran, no matter what Trump tells you, does not aspire and never has aspired to be a nuclear power. (See Gareth Porter's *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.) Nor does it aspire to attack the United States or Israel, though it does oppose Israeli oppression of the Palestinians. Iran is not on the march.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been an indispensable party to a great deal of mischief, including mischief involving al-Qaeda — you know, the organization that brought down the Twin Towers — throughout the greater region and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The U.S. friendship with Saudi Arabia has benefitted al-Qaeda and even worse offshoots in Syria.

Thus the demonization of Iran and the glorification of Saudi Arabia, whence Muslim extremism was born, has no rational basis.

And Israel? The self-declared State of the Jewish People (a label rejected by countless Jews worldwide) has forged an alliance with Saudi Arabia for the dual purpose of intimidating Iran and cowing the long-suffering Palestinians. America's entangling alliance with Israel has amounted to a gross offense against humanity, blackening whatever reputation the United States once might have had as a beacon of freedom, justice, and goodwill. Furthermore, the partnership has endangered Americans by provoking a desire for revenge in those who identify with the Muslim victims of U.S.-Israeli policy.

One final matter: the question of whether the U.S. government should block arms sales to the Saudis. We can say for sure that the government should in no way *facilitate* the sales. That's an easy one. But maybe the arms makers need neither government material help nor Trump's salesmanship to close deals with the House of Saud. In refusing to come down too hard on Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi disappearance, Trump said, "I will tell you up front, right now they're spending \$110 billion purchasing military equipment. And if we don't sell to them, they'll say thank you very much, we'll buy it from Russia or China." (On the actual size of the deal, see this.)

Is Trump right that Russia or China might have gotten the deal? I don't know, but if he is right, it raises interesting questions: did Trump make any side promises to close the deal; if so, what were they and would the deal have gone through without them? Most likely, any promises have involved things Trump and perhaps Israel would or would not do with respect to Iran and the Palestinians. We deserve answers.

Assuming American arms makers would sell arms to Saudi Arabia and other regimes without government help, we may complicate the matter further by pointing out that those firms are not actually private enterprises, no matter their appearance. Rather, they are creatures of the American state and deserve no respect from supporters of free enterprise. It's unlikely they would exist in anything like their current form, if at all, were it not for the U.S. government, its captive taxpayers, and its global imperial apparatus, whose personnel rotate regularly between "national security" jobs and lucrative seats on defense contractors' boards of directors. The upshot is that these nominally private firms are really state-held, that is, illegitimately held, property and could legitimately be liberated and turned to the production of goods for the consumers. In 1969 Murray Rothbard and Karl

Hess wrote provocatively about when an apparently private entity is actually not private and what we might do about it. Some of their solutions are debatable, but Rothbard was surely correct when he wrote: “What we libertarians object to, then, is not *government per se* but crime, what we object to is unjust or criminal property titles; what we are for is not ‘private’ property *per se* but just, innocent, non-criminal private property. It is justice vs. injustice, innocence vs. criminality that must be our major libertarian focus.”

The Arms Export Control Act of 1976 (AECA) requires a president to ensure that arms sold to other governments are used for defensive purposes only. Obviously, this act is flouted every day. Imagine if it were applied to Saudi Arabia and Israel! It’s not that I’m a fan of the AECA: a president who wants to see arms sold to a repressive regime will find ways to give that regime a clean bill of health; the AECA would have no force in such a case. On the other hand, it has been used to harass exporters of encryption software to people who would use it to protect themselves from their oppressors’ prying eyes.

So what can we do? Our options are limited at this point. But one ought to do whatever one can to sow public hostility toward these “merchants of death”: public shaming, divestment campaigns, and the like. It’s the least we can do. At least let us make a loud noise!

If someone is going to sell arms to the Saudis and other regimes, I’d rather it be someone other than us Americans because I don’t want to be even remotely associated with the inevitable crimes against humanity that will follow.