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Donald Trump's Dangerous Love Affair With Saudi Arabia & Its Impacts on Mideast Security

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Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States shocked the world. The contrast between his worldview and that of his predecessor, Barack Obama, could not have been starker. The global forces of authoritarianism were given a huge boost by this turn of events while supporters of democracy and human rights were left demoralized and disillusioned. Among the governments that openly celebrated the 2016 presidential result, one country stands out—the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Relations between the House of Saud and the Obama Administration were strained. The differences over how to handle the threat from Iran (and the war in Syria) was a key cause of disagreement. After strongly criticizing the Saudis during the election campaign, true to his own style, Donald Trump reversed course 180 degrees. He chose Saudi Arabia as the destination to make his first foreign trip, breaking with past tradition where a new president would travel to Canada or Mexico.

Trump was given a heroic welcome in Saudi Arabia. While the U.S.-Saudi alliance was always strong, under the current administration it has entered a new phase of harmony and coordination. Both governments see the world through almost identical lenses. Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and White House senior adviser, has already made three visits to Riyadh, where reportedly he has developed a close friendship with Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. The implications for the future of the Middle East are immense.

In this paper, William Hartung explores this topic with historical depth, clarity, and sophistication. The prognosis he lays out is not positive for the region, notwithstanding the opposite view by some influential voices in the U.S. foreign policy establishment such as Thomas Friedman.¹ Our Center for Middle East Studies is honored to publish this occasional paper. We hope it will contribute to enhancing your understanding of this critical part of the world.

Nader Hashemi

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1. Thomas Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," New York Times, November 23, 2017.

Donald Trump's Dangerous Love Affair With Saudi Arabia and Its Impacts on Mideast Security

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At this point, it's no great surprise when Donald Trump walks away from past statements in service to some impulse of the moment. Nowhere, however, has such a shift been more extreme—or its potential consequences more dangerous—than in his sudden love affair with the Saudi royal family. It could, in the end, destabilize the Middle East in ways not seen in our lifetimes (which, given the growing chaos in the region, is no small thing to say).

Trump's newfound ardor for the Saudi regime is a far cry from his past positions, including his campaign season assertion that the Saudis were behind the 9/11 attacks and his complaints, as recently as this April, that the United States was losing a "tremendous amount of money" defending the kingdom.¹ That was yet another example of the sort of bad deal that President Trump was going to set right as part of his "America First" foreign policy.

Given this background, it came as a surprise to pundits, politicians, and foreign policy experts alike when the president chose Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, as the very first stop on his very first overseas trip.² This was clearly meant to underscore the importance his administration was suddenly placing on the need to bolster the long-standing U.S.-Saudi alliance.

Mindful of Trump's vanity, the Saudi government rolled out the red carpet for our narcissist-in-chief, lining the streets for miles with alternating U.S. and Saudi flags, of which huge images were projected onto the Ritz-Carlton hotel where Trump was staying.³ (Before his arrival, in a sign of the psychological astuteness of his Saudi hosts, the hotel projected a five-story-high image of Trump himself onto its façade, pairing it with a similarly huge and flattering photo of the country's ruler, King Salman.)⁴ His hosts also put up billboards with pictures of Trump and Salman over the slogan "together we prevail." What exactly the two countries were to prevail against was left open to interpretation. It is, however, unlikely that the Saudis were thinking

1. Mehdi Hasan, "Donald Trump Said Saudi Arabia Was Behind 9/11. Now He's Going There On His First Foreign Trip," *The Intercept*, May 18, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/05/18/donald-trump-said-saudi-arabia-was-behind-911-now-hes-going-there-on-his-first-foreign-trip/>.

See also Stephen J. Adler, Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, "Exclusive: Trump Complains Saudis Not Paying Fair Share for U.S. Defense," *Reuters*, April 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-mideast-exclusive/exclusive-trump-complains-saudis-not-paying-fair-share-for-u-s-defense-idUSKBN17U08A>.

2. Anne Applebaum, "Trump's Bizarre and un-American Visit to Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/05/21/trumps-bizarre-and-un-american-visit-to-saudi-arabia/?utm_term=.ece3c162bf3c.

3. Ben Hubbard, "With Harleys and Hamburgers, Saudis Salute U.S. on Trump's Visit," *New York Times*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-king-salman-donald-trump-visit.html?r=0>.

4. Anna Giaritelli, "Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh Projects Five-Story Portrait of Trump on Side of Hotel," *Washington Examiner*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/ritz-carlton-in-riyadh-projects-five-story-portrait-of-trump-on-side-of-hotel/article/2623669>.

about Trump's much-denounced enemy, ISIS--given that Saudi planes, deep into a war in neighboring Yemen, have rarely joined Washington's air war against that outfit.⁵ More likely, what they had in mind was their country's bitter regional rival Iran.

The agenda planned for Trump's stay included an anti-terrorism summit attended by 50 leaders from Arab and Muslim nations, a concert by country singer Toby Keith, and an exhibition game by the Harlem Globetrotters.⁶ Then there were the strange touches like President Trump, King Salman, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi laying hands on a futuristically glowing orb--images of which then circled the planet--in a ceremony inaugurating a new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology⁷, and Trump's awkward participation⁸ in an all-male sword dance.

Unsurprisingly enough, the president was pleased with the spectacle staged in his honor, saying of the anti-terrorism summit in one of his many signature flights of hyperbole, "There has never been anything like it before, and perhaps there never will be again."⁹

Here, however, is a statement that shouldn't qualify as hyperbole: never have such preparations for a presidential visit paid such quick dividends.

Here, however, is a statement that shouldn't qualify as hyperbole: never have such preparations for a presidential visit paid such quick dividends. On arriving home, Trump jumped at the chance to embrace a fierce Saudi attempt to blockade and isolate its tiny neighbor Qatar, whose policies have long irritated the former.¹⁰ The Saudis claimed to

be focused on that country's alleged role in financing terrorist groups in the region (a category they themselves fit into remarkably well).¹¹ More likely, however, the royal family wanted

5. "Number of strikes per month, in Iraq and Syria," *Airwars*, <https://airwars.org/data/>.

6. Karen DeYoung and Philip Rucker, "Trump Summons Muslim Nations to Confront 'Islamic Terror of All Kinds'," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/us-and-gulf-nations-agree-to-crack-down-on-terror-financing/2017/05/21/e1222b34-3dfd-11e7-9e48-c4f199710b69_story.html?utm_term=.11868a9257da.

7. "What Was That Glowing Orb Trump Touched in Saudi Arabia?" *New York Times*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/22/world/middleeast/trump-glowing-orb-saudi.html>. See also Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, <https://etidal.org>.

8. Eric Levenson and Noah Gray, "Trump Bounces Along to Saudi Sword Dance," *CNN Politics*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/20/politics/trump-saudi-arabia-dance/index.html>.

9. Mark Lander and Gardiner Harris, "Trump Team's Shifts Jolt Some Allies and Soothe Others," *New York Times*, June 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-calls-for-calm-in-middle-east-standoff-with-qatar.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0.

10. Max Fisher, "How the Saudi-Qatar Rivalry, Now Combusting, Reshaped the Middle East," *New York Times*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/middleeast/how-the-saudi-qatar-rivalry-now-combusting-reshaped-the-middle-east.html>.

11. Ben Norton, "Saudi Arabia Funds and Exports Islamic Extremism: The Truth Behind the Toxic U.S. Relationship with the Theocratic Monarchy," *Salon*, January 6, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/01/06/saudi_arabia_funds_and_exports_islamic_extremism_the_truth_behind_the_toxic_u_s_relationship_with_the_theocratic_nation/.

to bring Qatar to heel after it failed to jump enthusiastically onto the Saudi-led anti-Iranian bandwagon.

Trump, who clearly knew nothing about the subject, accepted the Saudi move with alacrity and at face value. In his normal fashion, he even tried to take credit for it, tweeting, “During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar--look!”¹² And according to Trump, the historic impact of his travels hardly stopped there. As he also tweeted: “So good to see Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries paying off... Perhaps it will be the beginning of the end of the horror of terrorism.”¹³

Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution hit the nail on the head when he commented that “the Saudis played Donald Trump like a fiddle. He unwittingly encouraged their worst instincts toward their neighbors.”¹⁴ The *New York Times* captured one likely impact of the Saudi move against Qatar when it reported, “Analysts said Mr. Trump’s public support for Saudi Arabia... sent a chill through other Gulf States, including Oman and Kuwait, for fear that any country that defies the Saudis or the United Arab Emirates could face ostracism as Qatar has.”¹⁵

Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis took a different approach to the Saudi-Qatar feud, mindful that Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the region, a jumping off point for U.S. air strikes against ISIS. And Trump himself turned on a dime when he said the fight between the two U.S. allies could be easily solved.¹⁶ Whether he follows up remains to be seen.

In the mean time, Qatar is weathering the embargo imposed by the Saudi-led coalition, helped by trade with Iran and Turkey and financing from Asia. In fact, a survey of economists conducted by *Bloomberg News* has predicted that Qatar is likely to have far and away the fastest growth rate of any Gulf state in 2018. Meanwhile, Qatar has moved to solidify its ties with Washington and European capitals by purchasing fighter jets from the United States and ships from Italy.¹⁷

Simon Henderson, a journalist who toured the region in late September of 2017 and spoke to parties on both sides of the dispute, has suggested that “the showdown in the Gulf shows no

12. Rebecca Kheel, “Foreign Relations Chairman Stunned by Trump’s Qatar Tweets,” *The Hill*, June 6, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/336557-foreign-relations-chairman-stunned-silenced-by-trumps-qatar-tweets>.

13. Andrew Buncombe, “Trump Says his Saudi Arabia Visit Could Be ‘Beginning of the End for Terrorism,’” *The Independent*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/News/world/middle-east/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia-end-of-terrorism-tweet-latest-us-president-a7775661.html>.

14. Mark Lander, “Trump Takes Credit for Saudi Move Against Qatar, a U.S. Military Partner,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia.html>.

15. David E. Sanger, Mark Landler, and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Has Busy Day in Vortex of Middle East Relations,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia-middle-east.html>.

16. “Trump Says Gulf Crisis Can Be ‘Solved Pretty Quickly,’” *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/trump-gulf-crisis-solved-pretty-quickly-170919205111009.html>.

17. Peter Waldman and Mohammed Sergie, “Qatar’s Plucky Plan to Outlast the Embargo,” *Bloomberg News*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-23/qatar-s-plucky-plan-to-outlast-the-saudi-embargo>.

signs of ending. And there don't seem to be any clear winners emerging.”¹⁸ Except, as Henderson notes, the lobbying and PR firms that are launching a barrage of pro- and anti-Qatar ads in the Washington, DC media and political market: “The only winners so far are the lobby groups making good money by providing advice, devising strategies, and setting up opposition websites and conferences. Seldom has the term “beltway bandits” seemed more appropriate.”¹⁹

And Then Came Trump...

And what precisely are the Saudis' instincts toward their neighbors? The leaders in Riyadh, led by King Salman's 31-year-old son, Saudi Defense Minister and deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, are taking the gloves off in an increasingly aggressive bid for regional dominance aimed at isolating Iran.²⁰ The defense minister and potential future leader of the kingdom, whose policies have been described as reckless and impulsive, underscored the new, harsher line on Iran in an interview with Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV in which he said, “We will not wait until the battle is in Saudi Arabia, but we will work so the battle is there in Iran.”²¹

The opening salvo in Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran campaign came in March 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition, including smaller Gulf petro-states (Qatar among them) and Egypt, intervened militarily in a chaotic situation in Yemen in an effort to reinstall Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi as the president of that country.²² They clearly expected a quick victory over their ill-armed enemies and yet, more than two years later, in a war that has grown ever harsher, they have in fact achieved little. Hadi, a pro-Saudi leader, had served as that country's interim president under an agreement that, in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2012, ousted long-standing Yemeni autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh.²³ In January 2015, Hadi himself was deposed by an alliance of Houthi rebels and remnants of forces loyal to former president Saleh.²⁴

The Saudis—now joined by Trump and his foreign policy team—have characterized the conflict as a war to blunt Iranian influence and the Houthi rebels have been cast as the vassals of Tehran.

18. Simon Henderson, “A Field Trip To the Front Lines of the Qatar-Saudi Cold War,” *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/28/a-field-trip-to-the-front-lines-of-the-qatar-saudi-cold-war/>.

19. Henderson, “A Field Trip.”

20. Patrick Cockburn, “Trump and Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman are the Most Dangerous Men in the World and They're Meeting Next Week,” *The Independent*, May 12, 2017, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-saudi-arabia-visit-means-war-with-iran-a7732861.html>).

21. Patrick Cockburn, “Prince Mohammed Bin Salman: Naive, Arrogant Saudi Prince is Playing with Fire,” *MPN News*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.mintpressnews.com/prince-mohammed-bin-salman-naive-arrogant-saudi-prince-is-playing-with-fire/212660/>. See also Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, “Rise of Saudi Prince Shatters Decades of Royal Tradition,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/rise-of-saudi-prince-shatters-decades-of-royal-tradition.html?_r=0 and Patrick Cockburn, “Most Dangerous Men in the World.”

22. “Saudi Arabia Launches Air Strikes in Yemen,” *BBC News*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32061632>.

23. “Yemen Crisis: Who is Fighting Whom?” *BBC News*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

24. “Yemen Crisis: Who is Fighting Whom?”

In reality, they have longstanding political and economic grievances that predate the current conflict and they would undoubtedly be fighting at this moment with or without support from Iran. As Middle Eastern expert Thomas Juneau recently noted in the *Washington Post*, “Tehran’s support for the Houthis is limited, and its influence in Yemen is marginal. It is simply inaccurate to claim that the Houthis are Iranian proxies.”²⁵

The Saudi-Emirati intervention in Yemen has had disastrous results. Thousands of civilians have been killed in an indiscriminate bombing campaign that has targeted hospitals, marketplaces, civilian neighborhoods, and even a funeral, in actions that Congressman Ted Lieu (D-CA) has said “look like war crimes.”²⁶ In addition, the Saudi bombing campaign has been enabled by Washington, which has supplied the kingdom with bombs, including cluster munitions, and aircraft, while providing aerial refueling services to Saudi planes to ensure longer missions and the ability to hit more targets.²⁷ It has also shared intelligence on targeting in Yemen.

The destruction of that country’s port facilities and the imposition of a naval blockade have had an even more devastating effect, radically reducing the ability of aid groups to get food, medicine, and other essential supplies into a country now suffering from a major outbreak of cholera and on the brink of a massive famine.²⁸ This situation will only be made worse if the coalition tries to retake the port of Hodeidah, the entry point for most of the humanitarian aid still getting into Yemen.²⁹ Not only has the U.S.-backed Saudi war sparked a humanitarian crisis,

Not only has the U.S.-backed Saudi war sparked a humanitarian crisis, but it has inadvertently strengthened al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has increased its influence in Yemen while the Saudi- and Houthi-led coalitions are busy fighting each other.

25. Thomas Juneau, “No, Yemen’s Houthis Actually Aren’t Iranian Puppets,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/16/contrary-to-popular-belief-houthis-arent-iranian-proxies/?utm_term=.bc6c9dc161d7.

26. Kristine Beckerle, “Trump to Reward Saudi War Crimes with Weapons,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/20/trump-reward-saudi-war-crimes-weapons>.

See also Ben Norton, “A Congressman Campaigns to ‘Stop the Madness’ of U.S. Support for Saudi Bombing in Yemen,” *The Intercept*, August 22, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/22/a-congressman-campaigns-to-stop-the-madness-of-u-s-support-for-saudi-bombing-in-yemen/>.

27. William D. Hartung, “U.S. Arms Transfers to Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen,” *Center for International Policy*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.ciponline.org/research/entry/u.s.-arms-transfers-to-saudi-arabia-and-the-war-in-yemen>. See also Hartung, “Obama Shouldn’t Trade Cluster Bombs for Saudi Arabia’s Friendship,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/opinion/obama-saudi-arabia-trade-cluster-bombs.html>.

28. “Lift Blockade of Yemen to Stop ‘Catastrophe’ of Millions Facing Starvation, Says UN Expert”, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, April 12, 2017. See also Les Roopnarine, Patrick Wintour, Saeed Kamali, and Ahmad Alghobary, “Yemen at ‘Point of No Return’ as Conflict Leaves Almost 7 Million Close to Famine,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/16/yemen-conflict-7-million-close-to-famine>.

29. Aziz El Yaakoubi, “U.N. Urges Yemen Parties to Keep Hodeidah Port Safe,” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-04-05/un-urges-yemen-parties-to-keep-hodeidah-port-safe>.

but it has inadvertently strengthened al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has increased its influence in Yemen while the Saudi- and Houthi-led coalitions are busy fighting each other.³⁰

The war's impacts are so severe that a UN official has described the situation in Yemen as "the world's worst humanitarian crisis." More than 17 million people are food insecure, with seven million at risk of starvation. A child under five in Yemen dies every 10 minutes due to preventable causes. And there are now over 540,000 cases of cholera in the country.³¹

Trump's all-in support for the Saudis in its war doesn't, in fact, come out of the blue. Despite some internal divisions over the wisdom of doing so, the Obama administration also supported the Saudi war effort in a major way. This was part of an attempt to reassure the royals that the United States was still on their side and would not tilt towards Iran in the wake of an agreement to cap and reverse that country's nuclear program.³²

It was only after concerted pressure from Congress and a coalition of peace, human rights, and humanitarian aid groups that the Obama administration finally took a concrete, if limited, step to express opposition to the Saudi targeting of civilians in Yemen.³³ In a December 2016 decision, it suspended a sale of laser-guided bombs and other precision-guided munitions to their military.³⁴ The move outraged the Saudis, but proved at best a halfway measure as the refueling of Saudi aircraft continued, and none of the rest of the record \$115 billion in U.S. weaponry offered to that country during the Obama years was affected.³⁵

And then came Trump. His administration has doubled down on the Saudi war in Yemen by lifting the suspension of the bomb deal, despite the objections of a Senate coalition led by Chris Murphy (D-CT), Rand Paul (R-KY), and Al Franken (D-MN) that recently mustered³⁶ an unprecedented 47 votes against Trump's offer of precision-guided bombs to Riyadh. In late September, Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) introduced a resolution designed to withdraw all U.S. forces from Yemen unless there is an affirmative vote of Congress authorizing their presence

30. Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen has made al Qaeda Stronger and Richer," *Reuters*, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

31. Data from United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <http://www.unocha.org/yemen/about-ocha-yemen>.

32. Trevor Thrall and John Glaser, "The U.S. Should Stop Supporting the War in Yemen," Cato Institute, February 17th, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/us-should-stop-supporting-war-yemen>.

33. Jeff Abramson, "Fight Brewing on Saudi Arms Sales," Arms Control Association, May 31, 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-06/news-briefs/fight-brewing-saudi-arms-sales>.

34. Phil Stewart and Warren Strobel, "U.S. to Halt Some Arms Sales to Saudi, Citing Civilian Deaths in Yemen Campaign," *Reuters*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-arabia-yemen-exclusive/u-s-to-halt-some-arms-sales-to-saudi-citing-civilian-deaths-in-yemen-campaign-idUSKBN1421UK>.

35. Yara Bayoumy, "Obama Administration Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Top \$115 Billion: Report," *Reuters*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security/obama-administration-arms-sales-offers-to-saudi-top-115-billion-report-idUSKCN11D2JQ>.

36. Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Saudi Arabia and Donald Trump Just Narrowly Avoided a Major Senate Defeat," *Huffington Post*, June 13, 2017 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/senate-approves-first-portion-of-trumps-saudi-weapons-deal_us_59395477e4b0061054802abb).

there.³⁷ Defense Secretary Mattis has advocated yet more vigorous support for the Saudi-led intervention, including additional planning assistance and yet more intelligence sharing--but not, for the moment, the introduction of U.S. troops.³⁸ Although the Trump foreign policy team has refused to endorse a proposal by the United Arab Emirates, one of the Saudi coalition members, to attack the port at Hodeidah, it's not clear if that will hold.

A Parade for an American President?

In addition to Trump's kind words on Twitter, the clearest sign of his administration's uncritical support for the Saudi regime has been the offer of an astounding \$110 billion worth of arms to the kingdom, a sum almost equal to the record levels reached during all eight years of the Obama administration.³⁹ (This may, of course, have been part of the point, showing that President Trump could make a bigger, better deal than that slacker Obama, while supporting what he described as "jobs, jobs, jobs" in the United States.)⁴⁰

Like all things Trumpian, however, that \$110 billion figure proved to be an exaggeration.⁴¹ Tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms included in the package had already been promised under Obama, and tens of billions more represent promises that, experts suspect, are unlikely to be kept. But that still leaves a huge package, one that, according to the Pentagon, will include more than 100,000 bombs of the sort that can be used in the Yemen war, should the Saudis choose to do so.⁴² All that being said, the most important aspect of the deal may be political--Trump's way of telling "my friend King Salman," as he now calls him, that the United States is firmly in his camp.⁴³ And this is, in fact, the most troubling development of all.

37. "Murphy, Paul, Franken Demand Senate Vote on Proposed Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia", Chris Murphy, United States Senator for Connecticut, May 25, 2017, <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-paul-franken-demand-senate-vote-on-proposed-weapons-sale-to-saudi-arabia>; Dan De Luce, "Lawmakers Demand U.S. Withdrawal from Saudi-led War in Yemen," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/28/lawmakers-demand-u-s-withdrawal-from-saudi-led-war-in-yemen/amp/>.

38. Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "Trump Administration Weighs Deeper Involvement in Yemen War," *The Washington Post*, March 26 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-weighs-deeper-involvement-in-yemen-war/2017/03/26/b81eecd8-0e49-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120_story.html?utm_term=.58fa2050435c.

39. Javier E. David, "US-Saudi Arabia Seal Weapons Deal Worth Nearly \$110 Billion as Trump Begins Visit," *CNBC*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/20/us-saudi-arabia-seal-weapons-deal-worth-nearly-110-billion-as-trump-begins-visit.html>; Yara Bayoumy, "Obama Administration Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Top \$115 Billion: Report," *Reuters*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security/obama-administration-arms-sales-offers-to-saudi-top-115-billion-report-idUSKCN11D2JQ>.

40. "Trump Says Saudi Arabia Deal Will Create 'Jobs, Jobs, Jobs'", *CBS Miami*, May 20, 2017, <http://miami.cbslocal.com/2017/05/20/trump-saudi-arabia-deal-jobs-jobs-jobs/>.

41. William D. Hartung, "There's Less than Meets the Eye in Trump's Saudi Arms Deal," *Defense One*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/05/theres-less-meets-eye-trumps-saudi-arms-deal/138055/>.

42. Aaron Mehta, "Revealed: Trump's \$110 Billion Weapons List for the Saudis," *Defense News*, June 8, 2017, <http://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2017/06/08/revealed-trump-s-110-billion-weapons-list-for-the-saudis/>.

43. Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump Team's Shifts Jolt Some Allies and Soothe Others," *New York Times*, June 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-calls-for-calm-in-middle-east-standoff-with-qatar.html?_r=0.

It's bad enough that the Obama administration allowed itself to be dragged into an ill-conceived, counterproductive, and regionally destabilizing war in Yemen. Trump's uncritical support of Saudi foreign policy could have even more dangerous consequences. The Saudis are more intent than Trump's own advisers (distinctly a crew of Iranophobes) on ratcheting up tensions with Iran.⁴⁴ It's no small thing, for instance, that Mattis, who has asserted that Iran is "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East," and who advocated U.S. military attacks on that country during his tenure as head of the U.S. Central Command, looks sober-minded compared to the Saudi royals.⁴⁵

If there is even a glimmer of hope in the situation, it might lie in the efforts of both Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson to walk back the president's full-throated support for a Saudi confrontation with Qatar. Tillerson, for instance, has attempted to pursue an effort to mediate the Saudi-Qatari dispute and has called for a "calm and thoughtful dialogue."⁴⁶ Similarly, on the same day as Trump tweeted in support of the Saudis, the Pentagon issued a statement praising Qatar's "enduring commitment to regional security."⁴⁷ This is hardly surprising given the roughly 10,000 troops the U.S. has at al-Udeid air base in Doha, its capital, and the key role that base plays in Washington's war on terror in the region. It is the largest American base in the Middle East and the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command, as well as a primary staging area for the U.S. war on ISIS.⁴⁸ The administration's confusion regarding how to deal with Qatar was further underscored when Mattis and Qatari Defense Minister Khalid Al-Attiyah signed a \$12 billion deal for up to 36 Boeing F-15 combat aircraft, barely a week after President Trump had implied that Qatar was the world capital of terrorist financing.⁴⁹

In a further possible counter to Trump's aggressive stance, Mattis has suggested that perhaps it's time to pursue a diplomatic settlement of the war in Yemen. In April, he told reporters that "in regards to the Saudi and Emirati campaign in Yemen, our goal, ladies and gentleman, is for that

44. Danny Sjrursen, "Tomgram: Danny Sjrursen, Beating the War Drums...Again," *TomDispatch*, May 30, 2017, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176289/>.

45. Leo Shane III, "General Mattis Wants Iran to be a Top Focus for the Next President (Whoever it is)" *Military Times*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2016/04/22/general-mattis-wants-iran-to-be-a-top-focus-for-the-next-president-whoever-it-is/>; Greg Jaffe and Adam Entous, "As a General, Mattis Urged Action Against Iran. As a Defense Secretary, He May be a Voice of Caution," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-a-general-mattis-urged-action-against-iran-as-a-defense-secretary-he-may-be-a-voice-of-caution/2017/01/08/5a196ade-d391-11e6-a783-cd3fa950f2fd_story.html?utm_term=.48d042be239b.

46. Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump Team's Shifts Jolt Some Allies and Soothe Others," *New York Times*, June 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-calls-for-calm-in-middle-east-standoff-with-qatar.html?_r=0.

47. Phil Stewart, "U.S. Military Praises Qatar, Despite Trump Tweet," *Reuters*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-usa-pentagon/u-s-military-praises-qatar-despite-trump-tweet-idUSKBN18X2G2>.

48. Rebecca Kheel, "U.S. Officials Downplay Arab Nations Splitting with Qatar," *The Hill*, June 5, 2017 <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/336339-mattis-tillerson-rift-between-qatar-other-arab-countries-wont-affect-isis>.

49. Anthony Capaccio and Nick Wadhams, "Qatar Signs \$12 Billion Deal for U.S. F-15 Jets Amid Gulf Crisis," *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-14/qatar-said-to-sign-deal-for-u-s-f-15s-as-gulf-crisis-continues>.

crisis down there, that ongoing fight, [to] be put in front of a U.N.-brokered negotiating team and try to resolve this politically as soon as possible.”⁵⁰ Mattis went on to decry the number of civilians being killed, stating that the war there “has simply got to be brought to an end.”

It remains to be seen whether Tillerson’s and Mattis’s conciliatory words are hints of a possible foot on the brake in the Trump administration when it comes to building momentum for what could, in the end, be a U.S. military strike against Iran, egged on by Donald Trump’s good friends in Saudi Arabia. As Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group has noted, if the U.S. ends up going to war against Iran, it would “make the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts look like a walk in the park.”⁵¹

In fact, in a period when the turmoil has only risen in much of the rest of the greater Middle East, the Saudi Arabian peninsula remained relatively stable, at least until the Saudi-led coalition drastically escalated the civil war in Yemen. The new, more aggressive course being pursued against the royal family in Qatar, the arrests of Saudis seen as potential rivals to Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and the forced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in an effort to reduce the influence of Hezbollah are all part of an effort to step up pressure on Iran, and could make matters much, much worse, and fast.

Internally, a combination of repression and generous social benefits to its citizens--a form of political bribery designed to buy loyalty--has allowed the Saudi royal family to avoid the fate of other regional autocrats driven from power.⁵² But with low oil prices and a costly war in Yemen, the regime is being forced to reduce the social spending that has helped cement its hold on power.⁵³ It’s possible that further military adventures, coupled with a backlash against its repressive policies, could break what analysts Sarah Chayes and Alex de Waal have described as the current regime’s “brittle hold on power.”⁵⁴

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50. “Media Availability with Secretary Mattis En Route to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 18, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1154616/media-availability-with-secretary-mattis-en-route-to-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>.

51. Julian Borger, David Smith, Spencer Ackerman, and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Trump Administration ‘Officially Putting Iran on Notice’, says Michael Flynn,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/iran-trump-michael-flynn-on-notice>.

52. “Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security,” Amnesty International, December 2011, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/saudisecurity.pdf>.

53. Katy Barnato, “Could Saudi Arabia’s Austerity Spark Social Turmoil?” *CNBC*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/01/13/could-saudi-arabias-austerity-spark-social-turmoil.html>.

54. “Start Preparing for the Collapse of the Saudi Kingdom,” *Defense One*, February 16, 2016, <http://www>.

The arrests of key members of the royal family, including the head of the Saudi National Guard, have given Mohammed Bin Salman unchallenged control of all of Saudi Arabia's security agencies to match his leading role in reforming the kingdom's economy. The regime attempted to justify the crackdown as a move to root out corruption, but most analysts of the region see it as an aggressive attempt to consolidate Mohammed Bin Salman's power in advance of his rise to the throne, which could occur at any time given the health problems of his father, King Salman.⁵⁵

As with all the other controversial policies of the current Saudi regime, Donald Trump jumped to their defense, tweeting that "I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing... Some of those they are harshly treating have been 'milking' their country for years."⁵⁶ The "harsh treatment" referenced by Trump has reportedly included torture and beatings.⁵⁷

The Saudi regime's attempt to further insert itself into the internal politics of Lebanon could be the most dangerous move of all. The Saudi decision to detain Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and force his resignation is the first step in attempting to reduce the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon and in the region. Some analysts have suggested that the forced resignation and the evacuation of Saudi citizens from Lebanon are a first step in clearing the way for an Israeli bombing campaign in Lebanon. But at least some voices in Israel have suggested that they will not let Saudi Arabia provoke a war in which Riyadh will stand on the sidelines and let Israel face the risks of a counter-attack by Hezbollah, which is stronger than when it fought Israel to a draw in a 2006 war, possessing an estimated 120,000 missiles that could hit targets in Israel.⁵⁸ An Israeli attack on Lebanon cannot be ruled out, but it is unlikely to happen on Mohammed Bin Salman's timeline.

All of these moves are ultimately aimed at reducing the influence of Iran in the region. And as the *New York Times* has noted, "many, including current and former American diplomats, say Prince Mohammed's boldness also reflects his conviction that he has the support of Mr. Trump."⁵⁹

defenseone.com/ideas/2016/02/de-waal-and-chayes-saudi-arabia/125953/.

55. Kareem Fahim, "Crown Prince Gains Power After Sweeping Purge of Saudi Officials," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-arabia-detains-princes-ministers-and-billionaire-investor-in-extraordinary-purge/2017/11/05/ea0aa25c-c1fc-11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1_story.html?utm_term=.fc8c5b2a0330 .

56. David Smith, "Trump Praises Saudi Corruption Purge, Claiming Targets are 'Milking' Kingdom," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/06/donald-trump-saudi-arabia-corruption-crackdown-tweet>

57. David Hearst, "Senior Saudi Figures Tortured and Beaten in Purge," *Middle East Eye*, November 9, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-senior-figures-tortured-and-beaten-saudi-purge-1489501498> .

58. Amos Harel, "Israel Is In No Hurry To Do The Saudis' Bidding in Lebanon," *Haaretz*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.822185> .

59. Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "The Upstart Saudi Prince Who's Throwing Caution to the Wind," *New York Times*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-salman.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news> .

In other words, what a time for the Trump administration to offer its all-in support for the plans of an aggressive yet fragile regime whose reckless policies could even spark a regional war.

Maybe it's time for opponents of a stepped-up U.S. military role in the Middle East to throw Donald Trump a big, glitzy parade aimed at boosting his ego and dampening his enthusiasm for the Saudi royal family. It might not change his policies, but at least it would get his attention.

U.S. Policy Going Forward

If the United States is to play a constructive role in resolving the conflicts in the Middle East, it needs to start by ending activities that are clearly making matters worse, like the Trump administration's uncritical support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Washington should suspend arms deliveries to Riyadh and stop refueling Saudi planes until the regime stops targeting civilians in its bombing campaign, and participates in good faith in peace talks involving all parties to the conflict.

The United States should also take a more critical stance towards the foreign policy initiatives of the Saudi regime, to avoid being dragged into another war akin to the conflict in Yemen as well as to preserve its options in the region. The Obama administration made a serious mistake in offering more arms sales and stronger backing of the Saudi intervention in Yemen to "reassure" the kingdom that it would not tilt towards Iran in the wake of the deal that rolled back Iran's nuclear weapons program. Iran has plenty to answer for, not least of which is its support for the Assad regime in Syria, but it is not the root of all evil in the Middle East, and viewing it as such is an obstacle to resolving some of the area's most intractable conflicts.

In keeping with the policy of trying to avoid making matters worse, Washington should slow the flow of U.S. arms to the region, many of which are being used to harm civilians and to ratchet up conflicts. A case in point was the Obama administration's record-setting arms offers to Saudi Arabia during the former's two terms, a record that President Trump has pledged to top. A reduction in U.S. sales should be the jumping off point for multilateral talks on reducing arms transfers to the region—an admittedly difficult but urgently needed undertaking.

In other words, what a time for the Trump administration to offer its all-in support for the plans of an aggressive yet fragile regime whose reckless policies could even spark a regional war.

About the Author



William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy and a senior adviser to the center's Security Assistance Monitor. He is the author of *Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex* (Nation Books, 2011) and the co-editor, with Miriam Pemberton, of *Lessons from Iraq: Avoiding the Next War* (Paradigm Press, 2008). His previous books include *And Weapons for All* (HarperCollins, 1995), a critique of U.S. arms sales policies from the Nixon through Clinton administrations. From July 2007 through March 2011, Mr. Hartung was the director of the Arms and Security Initiative at the New America Foundation. Prior to that, he served as the director of the Arms Trade Resource Center at the World Policy Institute. He also worked as a speechwriter and policy analyst for New York State Attorney General Robert Abrams. Bill Hartung's articles on security issues have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Nation*, and the *World Policy Journal*. He has been a featured expert on national security issues on CBS 60 Minutes, NBC Nightly News, the Lehrer Newshour, CNN, Fox News, and scores of local, regional, and international radio outlets. He blogs for the *Huffington Post*, *the Hill*, and *Medium*.

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