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ELSEVIER WEEKBLAD

Why Trump Chooses the Saudis

By Matt A. Mayer

Let me start with a brief thought exercise. In its forty-year history, can you think of one positive thing the Islamic Republic of Iran has done? In contrast, can you recall handfuls of negative things it has done? For most readers, the answer to the former question is “no” while the answer to the latter is “of course.” From sponsoring terrorist attacks outside its borders to oppressing its citizens, from engaging in proxy wars in other countries to killing thousands of political prisoners, Iran over the last forty years has caused great harm inside Iran and across the globe. It has relentlessly called for the destruction of Israel and death to all Jews.

No one can seriously argue that Iran is anything other than a terrorist state that holds its people hostage.

Let me also ask you to look at a map of the Middle East. On the eastern border of Iran is Afghanistan. On the western border of Iran is Iraq. For the last eighteen years, America has spent trillions of dollars fighting wars in both of those countries, rebuilding them, and trying to help them become stable, non-terrorist-affiliated countries. During that time, 2,372 Americans were killed and another 20,320 were wounded in Afghanistan. In Iraq, more than 4,424 Americans were killed, with 31,952 wounded.

When Donald Trump ran for the presidency in 2016, he stated clearly his intent to get American out of the Middle East to the extent he could. Tens of millions of Americans agreed with this sentiment, believing that our country has paid a high enough price in blood and treasure trying to “fix” the Middle East. Upon winning the election, President Trump directed the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State to start moving towards the goal of getting the U.S. military out of many of the hot spots we’ve been in for decades.

That brings us to 4th century BCE Indian strategist Kautilya and his statement in his treatise on statecraft, [The Arthashastra](#), that the “enemy of my enemy is my friend.” As it relates to U.S. policy in the Middle East, the enemies of Iran are Israel and Saudi Arabia. The former given its existence as a Jewish state and the only democracy in the Middle East, as well as Iran’s stated intent to “wipe it off the map.” The latter due to its status as the leading Sunni country in the Middle East and its location directly across the Persian Gulf from Shia-dominated Iran.

Of course, for many decades, America backed Saudi Arabia due to the rich oil deposits located within that country. America even went to war with Iraq in the 1990s specifically to protect Saudi Arabia from Saddam Hussein. Some would argue convincingly that we overlooked the connection between the 9/11 terrorists and Saudi Arabian officials who likely provided

them funding and other aid because of our dependence on their oil.

With the advent of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, however, over the last decade America has now become the dominant producer of oil and natural gas in the world. That status obviously makes us far less dependent upon Saudi Arabia for oil. Luckily for Saudi Arabia, as our oil dependence on them shrank, our desire to extricate ourselves from the Middle East grew. That desire makes it easier for us to overlook the darker side of Saudi Arabia, including its export of Wahhabi terrorists, its oppression of women, and whatever role officials there had in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey.

Whether we like it or not, Saudi Arabia is a key player in the Middle East when it comes to keeping Iran in check. For America to shrink its footprint in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia will need to increase its role, especially given Iran’s efforts to grow its influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Keep in mind, Iraq abuts Saudi Arabia on its northern border, as Yemen is its southern border neighbor. Iranian proxies in those countries pose grave dangers to Saudi Arabia.

The fundamental reality is that many Americans are tired of our men and women dying in the Middle East, which we’ve been doing going on five decades. Without our need for its oil and the death of Saddam Hussein, the Middle East simply does not have the same strategic national security interest it once had. Iran now is the only real threat given its nuclear ambitions and terrorism activities. By working closely with Israel and Saudi Arabia, President Trump believes we can keep Iran’s hard power ambitions in check.

Concurrently, by withdrawing from what it believed was a flawed Iran nuclear deal and reinstating economic sanctions against Iran, the Trump Administration is seeking to use soft power to bring regime change in Iran and free its people from forty years of oppression and economic ruin. That is why Vice President Mike Pence took such an aggressive tone against three European countries in his speech at the Warsaw Conference, as those countries are enabling Iran to circumvent sanctions to sell oil thereby extending the reign of the mullahs.

Specifically, Vice President Pence said:

They call this scheme a special purpose vehicle; we call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran’s murderous revolutionary regime. It’s an ill-advised step that will only strengthen Iran, weaken

the EU and create still more distance between EU and the United States.

I realize some of you will blame President Trump for this conflict because he withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal against the wishes of many EU countries, but siding with the mullahs in Iran by giving them an escape valve against U.S. sanctions isn't the right way to get back at President Trump. As Vice President Pence noted, it only strengthens Iran's grip on power, keeps its people oppressed, and gives Iran more time to destabilize the Middle East.

It also turns Kautilya's strategic statecraft idea on its head by saying that, Iran, the enemy of my friend, America, is the EU's friend. Iran's forty years of bad behavior won't be swayed by allowing it to avoid economic ruin by pitting Europe against America. It therefore shouldn't surprise anyone in Europe that President Trump will work closely with Saudi Arabia to contain Iran's efforts to export brutality. He wants to get our troops out of the Middle East as soon as possible. If our regional allies there can facilitate that outcome, then so be it.

Realpolitik is back.

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