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Donald Trump Visits Riyadh, Putting Saudi Royals Before American People

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President Donald Trump is taking his first overseas trip. After once accusing Saudi Arabia of blowing up the World Trade Center, he arrived in Riyadh bearing gifts: \$110 billion in arms sales, enhanced aid for Riyadh's brutal war in Yemen, and increased political support for the royal regime.

The U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia never reflected shared values. The royals run what is essentially a totalitarian state, respecting neither political nor religious liberty. The regime exports its brutal values, subsidizing intolerant Islamist teachings worldwide and intervening militarily in its neighbors.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia long was home to the world's greatest oil reserves, giving it ready cash to spend and invest. So Washington enthusiastically embraced the regime. Despite previously criticizing the Saudis for relying on America for their defense, President Trump obsequiously addressed the monarchy. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that "President Trump and members of his cabinet agreed that the U.S.-Saudi partnership should be taken to new heights."

The two countries should cooperate when their interests coincide. But that doesn't justify making Riyadh a defense ward of America. Especially when at the KSA's behest the U.S. is helping kill innocent civilians in neighboring Yemen, who have done nothing against America. So far Washington has supported Riyadh's war with some \$20 billion in arms and about 2000 air refueling operations, as well as targeting information.

U.S. intervention is making Americans less safe. Thomas Juneau of the University of Ottawa observed that the conflict: "is at its root a civil war, driven by local competition for power, and not a regional, sectarian or proxy war." But Riyadh's aggressive war turned a local conflict into a regional sectarian struggle, drove Yemenis toward Iran, and encouraged a revival of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, which now controls an estimated third of the country. Riyadh's aggression also is morally appalling, helping kill innocents for no good geopolitical reason.

Yet the Trump administration is considering backing a plan by the United Arab Emirates to retake the Yemeni port of Hodeida. Seizing and securing the port would be more difficult than suggested—the conflict so far has highlighted the ineffectiveness of Saudi forces. Moreover, humanitarian analysts warn that the operation could result in a humanitarian catastrophe since most of Yemen's humanitarian aid goes through Hodeida. Jeremy Konyndyk, formerly at USAID, warned that "this operation would take a country that's been on a knife's edge of famine for the past two years and tip it over."

Expanding Washington's involvement also would increase America's stake in the conflict without much improving the likelihood of a positive outcome. A top administration official told the *Washington Post* that ending present restrictions might be seen as "a green light for direct involvement in a major war ... We can't judge yet what the results will be." The consequences almost certainly would be disastrous. Of course, the Saudi royals are pleased with Washington's willingness to underwrite tyranny and aggression, and gave President Trump—who once accused a Saudi prince of trying to "control U.S. politicians with daddy's money"—an extravagant welcome.

Yemen is an ancient land at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The Yemeni people never welcomed outside rule and made any would-be conqueror pay a price. Two states emerged when independence was achieved during the 1960s. They suffered internal conflict, fought each other, and suffered from foreign intervention, including from Saudi Arabia. The two Yemens eventually joined in 1990, but the reunited country spent most of its recent history in conflict and war. At one point Riyadh, now loudly denouncing Iranian meddling, backed southern secessionists.

Until recently America's main security concern was the rise of AQAP, perhaps the terrorist group's most active affiliate. To suppress this force the U.S. relied on long-ruling Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was ousted in 2012. The ensuing national dialogue failed to deliver a political solution. He then united with the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah ("Supporters of God"), a quasi-Shia political movement which battled him when he was in power.

Together in September 2014 they ousted his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, viewed as friendly to neighboring Saudi Arabia. This game of musical chairs in Sana'a was of little interest to Washington, but the KSA wanted pliant leadership in Yemen. In March 2015 Riyadh, backed by nine Arab nations, intervened in the name of confronting Iran. Yousef al-Otaiba, UAE's ambassador to the U.S., declared: "Iran must not be allowed to create a Hezbollah-like proxy in Yemen through the Houthis."

But area specialists uniformly dismiss such self-serving claims. The religious identification between Iran and the Houthis always was limited. The latter are Zaydis, a liberal, Shia-related sect, which some observers say is best treated as a tribal militia. In some areas Zaydis appear closer to Sunnis than Shiites.

The relationship between Iran and Houthis always has been loose at best. Noted Adam Baron of the European Council on Foreign Relations: "It's not as if the Houthis were created by Iran, and further, it's not as if the Houthis are being controlled by Iran. This is a group that is rooted in local Yemeni issues." Juneau said simply: "the war in Yemen is driven by local grievances and competition for power among Yemeni actors." Yezid Sayigh, of Beirut's Carnegie Middle East Center, criticized "propaganda about Iranian expansionism in Yemen."

Houthis revolted against the Yemeni government, then headed by Saleh, in 2004; in 2011 they joined demonstrations that led to Saleh's resignation the following year. But then Houthis joined with Saleh to confront his successor, Hadi, leading to the latter's resignation in late 2014.

Iran had little to do with these events. Saleh wanted to retake control and Houthis wanted more influence, while Hadi wanted to retain control. This kind of local dispute fueled decades of

conflict in Yemen. In fact, U.S. intelligence believes that Tehran counseled against the Houthis' Sana'a takeover.

While Houthis accepted Iran's aid, the UN figures that Tehran began transferring weapons to the Houthis in 2009, back when they were fighting then-President Saleh, now their uneasy ally. Since then most of their weapons came from the Yemen's already abundant supplies and military units which had remained loyal to Saleh.

Saudi Arabia's aggression left them with little choice but to look to Tehran for additional assistance. Noted Kevin L. Schwartz of the Library of Congress: "Only after the onset of the Saudi-led campaign did the arming of the Houthi rebels by Iran increase." And the latter has mainly involved training and ground weapons, along with modest missile deliveries. Such efforts pale in comparison to Saudi Arabia's extensive air war.

Houthis have not turned decision-making over to Iran. Gabriele von Bruck at London's School of Oriental and African Studies concluded "I don't think the Iranians have influence in their decision-making. It's not a relationship like that between Iran and Hezbollah." Obama NSC spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said two years ago: "It remains our assessment that Iran does not exert command and control over the Houthis in Yemen."

Contrary to the infamous claim of an Iranian parliamentarian, Tehran does not control Sana'a (nor, in fact, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus, the other three capitals mentioned). Instead, noted Juneau, "Tehran has come to recognize that a minor investment in Yemen can yield limited but interesting returns," most obviously forcing the Saudi royals to spend much more for little benefit.

Why should America get involved? Former Secretary of State John Kerry claimed that the shipment of Iranian weapons to Yemen was "not just a threat to Saudi Arabia, it is a threat to the region, [and] it is a threat to the United States." But Houthis struck beyond Yemen's borders only in response to *Saudi aggression backed by America*. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis complained of "Iranian-supplied missiles being fired by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia," but they commenced such actions *after Riyadh attacked and killed Yemenis*. Saudis sowed the wind by internationalizing the conflict; now they are reaping the whirlwind as Houthi forces attempt to take the battle back to Saudi Arabia.

That is not to say the Houthis are tolerant liberals who like the U.S. But their theology is far more moderate than the Wahhabist teachings funded by the Saudi royals around the world, including in America. Religious minorities do much better in Houthi-dominated areas than in territory controlled by the Hadi-Saudi alliance. This should surprise no one, given Saudi Arabia's refusal to allow members of any religious minority to practice their faith.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration made America an active combatant in Yemen's civil war. The reason, apparently, was to reassure Riyadh, which was angry that Washington was not doing its bidding in Syria (ousting Bashar al-Assad) and Iran (confronting rather than negotiating with Tehran).

The Saudis have gotten bogged down in the conflict and make little effort to avoid civilian casualties, incriminating the U.S. Shortly before leaving office the Obama administration cut off

some weapon shipments to Riyadh. But the Trump administration reversed course, adopting a subservient posture toward the royals. This is an awful policy for several reasons.

First, Washington is rewarding a totalitarian dictatorship for its repression. That Riyadh wants a puppet neighbor is unsurprising. But it isn't America's responsibility to give one to the Saudi royals.

Second, the conflict has diverted Saudi attention from the most destabilizing and dangerous force in the Mideast, the Islamic State. Riyadh is entitled to choose its own priorities, but Washington should not underwrite counterproductive Saudi efforts. After a Houthi missile attack on a U.S. warship Trump officials expressed concern about navigational freedom, especially in the Bab-el-Mandeb waterway. But Yemenis apparently attacked an American vessel because Washington was helping Saudis kill Yemenis. Before that Houthis never targeted Americans.

Third, the UN human rights coordinator called Yemen "the largest humanitarian crisis in the world." Houthis have interfered with the delivery of humanitarian aid, but Saudis and their coalition partners have caused far more death and destruction. More than 10,000 civilians have been killed and 40,000 wounded. Saudi airstrikes, described as "indiscriminate or disproportionate" by Human Rights Watch, caused at least two-thirds of infrastructure damage and three-quarters of the deaths.

Nearly 19 million people, more than 80 percent of the population, need humanitarian aid. More than ten million have acute need for assistance. About 13 million lack access to clean water. Some 60 percent of Yemen's people, or 17 million, are in "crisis" or "emergency" situations. The UN World Food Programme warned that the country is on the brink of "full-scale famine," with seven million people "severely food insecure." Some four million people already are acutely malnourished and 3.2 million have been displaced within the country. Health services have collapsed as the need for care has mushroomed.

Fourth, Hadi's restoration would not offer political stability. His support was limited even before Riyadh's intervention, coming more from the West than his own people; backing a brutal foreign attack on his nation has won him no friends. Indeed, warned Zimmerman, "The hodgepodge coalition against the al-Houthi-Saleh faction fractures rapidly once the question of power is on the table. None of the main component forces supports Hadi for president and few would support the return of the Yemeni central state as it was." There's also a separate southern secessionist movement which would try to defenestrate Hadi if he was restored.

Fifth, support for KSA brutality endangers Americans by creating and empowering another adversaries. Washington has turned itself into an enemy of the Yemeni people. U.S. policymakers expressed shock when Houthi forces apparently shot a missile at an American naval vessel, but America is a de facto belligerent and U.S. warships therefore are a legitimate target. The only surprise is that Houthis did not strike sooner.

Internationalizing the war also internationalized the weapons. Vice Admiral Kevin Donegan complained of equipment which Yemeni forces didn't previously possess: "there was no explosive boat that existed in the Yemeni inventory." That was before Saudi Arabia turned a civil war into an international sectarian conflict.

Moreover, there should be no surprise, let alone shock, if angry Yemenis turn to terrorism. Fear of that possibility may explain the administration's attempt to ban visitors from that nation.

Sixth, the Saudi war effort aided the rise of the Islamic State and Salafi militias. AQAP also is on the rise. The Crisis Group recently warned that the organization "is stronger than it has ever been." Noted a recent report from the State Department, AQAP and the Islamic State have "exploited the political and security vacuum left by the conflict between the Yemeni government and Houthi-led opposition." AQAP has been "significantly expanding its presence in the southern and eastern governorates" while ISIL has gained "a foothold in the country." The Crisis Group explained that al-Qaeda "is thriving in an environment of state collapse, growing sectarianism, shifting alliances, security vacuums and a burgeoning war economy."

AQAP's rise threatens the U.S. Argued former Pentagon official Andrew Exum, Yemen's campaign "has distracted both the United States and its key partners—namely the Emirates—from the fight against AQAP, one of the few al-Qaeda franchises with the demonstrated will and capability to strike the United States." Even before, America's allies had shown little interest in battling al-Qaeda. Journalist Laura Kasinof observed that Hadi, lacking internal support, "cozied up to the Islamists" before his ouster. Zimmerman reported that his regime tacitly cooperated with AQAP in some regions. Moreover, "The Saudi-led coalition tolerates AQAP's presence on the battlefield, so long as the group fights against the al-Houthi-Saleh forces."

The Pentagon has felt it necessary to intervene more directly against AQAP, with drone attacks, airstrikes, and special operations forces raids, with costly and controversial results. More strikes are likely, as the president relaxes White House oversight of the war effort. To the extent the organization gains resources and followers, it might succeed in its efforts to hit the American homeland. If so, the Obama and Trump administrations will share the blame.

Candidate Donald Trump was highly critical of President Barack Obama's foreign policy. Why, then, is President Trump doubling down on an unnecessary Middle Eastern war on behalf of an authoritarian regime guilty of promoting Islamic radicalism? Why is he subordinating fundamental American interests and values to those of a country which has provided more terrorists who attacked Americans than any other and done more to finance international terrorism than any other? Why is he entangling the U.S. in another distant, irrelevant, and unwinnable Mideast conflict after criticizing U.S. intervention in Iraq and Libya?

Americans have good reason to engage the KSA, despite its behavior. However, the Trump administration should not genuflect toward Riyadh. Washington should not sacrifice U.S. interests to benefit the Saudi royals. American officials should not enable the killing—murder, really—of people who have never harmed this nation.

Unfortunately, the administration appears fixated on Iran. Yet, observed Mustafa Alani, director of Dubai's Gulf Research Center: "It is a myth that Iran is strong." Tehran is at best a modest regional power, lagging well behind Saudi Arabia. President Trump complained in January that Iran is "going to have Yemen," along with Iraq and Syria: "They're going to have everything." But Washington gave, if that's the right word, Iraq to Tehran through its foolish invasion and Syria contains little to possess.

Moreover, nothing in Sana'a's history suggests that any Yemeni faction would sacrifice their country's autonomy. Said Zimmerman: "The al-Houthi leadership retains its independence from

Iran and has pushed back on Tehran's statements and offers repeatedly." Von Bruck argued that "The Houthis want Yemen to be independent, that's the key idea, they don't want to be controlled by Saudi or the Americans, and they certainly don't want to replace the Saudis with the Iranians."

Ironically, in Yemen Tehran is only doing what Saudi Arabia and far more distant America are doing, actively intervening with military force to promote its interests. Iran has as much as Saudi Arabia and far more than America at stake in the Yemen war. Imagine Washington's reaction if Iran fomented civil war in Mexico, attempting to overthrow a government aligned with the U.S.

Ultimately, a political settlement is necessary, one which puts the interests of the Yemeni people before that of either the Saudi royals or Iranian mullahs. Alas, so far the UN negotiating effort has excluded a role for the Houthis and thereby "ignores the fundamental grievances and local conflicts that generated the war in the first place," noted Zimmerman. Such an effort won't result in peace or stability. All foreign parties should step back. Added Zimmerman: "Sound American strategy would reach out to the al-Houthis along with other sub-state actors in Yemen, seek common ground with them, and work to facilitate a meaningful resolution of the conflict—including the underlying popular grievance that are driving it."

Riyadh's policy is at a dead-end. Saudi Arabia offered to make peace with Iran, if Tehran essentially surrendered all of its interests. The totalitarian monarchy in Riyadh proclaimed its support for Yemen's "elected government," headed by a man with minimal public support. After two years of embarrassing military failure, the deputy crown prince proclaimed that "time is in our favor."

Instead of doing the monarchy's bidding, the Trump administration should remember that the U.S., not Saudi Arabia, is the superpower, and Washington's obligation is to the American people, not Saudi Arabia's royals. Indeed, President Trump recently reiterated his criticism of Riyadh: "Frankly, Saudi Arabia has not treated us fairly, because we are losing a tremendous amount of money in defending Saudi Arabia."

But the problem with the bilateral relationship runs far deeper: America is losing its moral soul by aiding Riyadh in a brutal, aggressive war against an impoverished neighbor. Nothing warrants supporting the promiscuous killing of civilians who have never threatened America. Escalation only guarantees greater failure.

The Yemen war is a disaster. Noted Perry Cammack of the Carnegie Endowment, "By catering to Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the United States has empowered AQAP, strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security, brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse, and visited more death, destruction, and displacement on the Yemeni population." Washington should end this conflict.

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