

Forgetting Jamal Khashoggi: Donald Trump, Saudi Arabia and Brute Realism

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Global Research, November 22, 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

"I never thought I'd see the day a White House would moonlight as a public relations firm for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia." — Senator Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), Twitter, Nov 20, 2018

Accused of being mendacious, incapable of holding to a foundation of facts and indifferent to the world of evidence, President Donald J. Trump has stumped international relations watchers with metronomic regularity. He has also torn away the façade of decent, tolerable hypocrisy that is the "value system" of US foreign policy. In its place is violent and ugly calculation, the allure of unmitigated self-interest.

Students of such policy have traditionally seen the American imperium as a swaying creature: the realist view shuns sentimentality and sees the international environment as a jungle writ large, teeming with power plays; the idealist, who shades into a liberal internationalist, accepts a moral coating, and a certain degree of sanctimony, regarding international institutions, protocols and the like. From the latter came the at times emetic pronouncements of President Woodrow Wilson, who insisted that the United States shoulder the burdens of making the world safe for democracy. (It was often making it safe for business, but the confusion is an accepted one.)

One foreign policy tradition, [identified](#) by Walter Russell Mead, is the Jeffersonian strand. The eye here is turned inward, and promoting democracy overseas is a matter best left to others. Within Jefferson, two versions stood out like schizophrenic impulses: the first, keen on seeing the republic remain one of glorious yeomanry freed of imperial obligation; the second, interested to see the Republic embark on its imperial, manifestly deigned mission.

Mead does not stop there. If Trump's policy can ever find some classification – and here, the schemes are only illustrative, not dogmatic – he might well be part Jacksonian, that tradition Mead claims is hostile to Wilson's view of international institutions and Alexander Hamilton's insistence on pure open markets, freedom of the seas, and international financial and legal stability. The followers of Andrew Jackson's view embrace the military establishment, will use it sparingly, but, when provoked, will be satisfyingly violent.

The disturbing fascination of Trump's contribution to this babble on foreign policy is his instinctive revulsion of any position that might prevent a worthy transaction. Murdering journalists might be "bad", but worse is to hold a cashed-up medieval theocracy to account for it. There is no room for the grieving sentimentalist here: Jamal Khashoggi was dismembered, but why let his corpse dictate a change in approach to Riyadh?

Trump has his own bogey states to worry about, and he sees Iran as, in the [words](#) of his

November 20 statement, “responsible for a bloody proxy war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen”, behind the deaths of “many Americans and other innocent people”, a destabiliser of Iraq and a state sponsor of terrorism. Then there is the filthy lucre, the “record” amount of \$450 billion promised by Saudi Arabia as part of investments in the US.

Trump turns to dreamy fiction on this, imagining that “hundreds of thousands of jobs, tremendous economic development, and much additional wealth to the United States” will arise from Kingdom’s deep pockets. The Make America Great Again quotient is satisfied with some \$110 billion to “be spent on the purchase of military equipment from Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and other great US defence contractors.” Besides, Saudi Arabia had been “very responsive to my requests to keeping oil prices at reasonable levels – so important for the world.”

True, the death of a man deemed an “enemy of the state” by Saudi Arabia (“my decision is in no way based on that”) was a “an unacceptable and horrible crime” but “great independent research” suggested that 17 were directly connected with his death, deserving sanction. “It could very well be that the crown prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn’t!”

This turn of brutal honesty does not sit well with the hucksters in the GOP who prefer to hawk the wares of the Republic with counterfeit concerns for human rights and free expression. “When we lose our moral voice, we lose our strongest asset,” argues Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who also [claims](#) that the crown prince “has shown disrespect for the relationship”. This is the sort of fabled nonsense that has shielded US power from proper analysis, ignoring the giant’s cool, if often bungling calculations, while hiding in the comforting duvet of an exacting morality. One such stonking bungle featured the Saudi-dominated terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on US soil. To the US, both oil and apocalyptic terrorism.

Others speak of a complex situation, one that requires a ginger approach. This leaves room for much crawling cant. Senator Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [told](#) Chattanooga TV station WTVC that,

“It is a delicate situation when we have a long-term ally that we’ve had for decades, but we have a crown prince that I believe ordered the killing of a journalist.”

Corker’s focus is wearily slanted, finding specific fault in a regime for one savage incident, and clearly ignoring its otherwise extensive butcher’s bill. The brutalities of the Saudi security services, the kingdom’s famine inflicting war in Yemen, are chickenfeed matters relative to the sanguinary fate of Khashoggi. “Everything points to the fact that [the crown prince] knew about it and directed it.” Doing so enables Corker and his like-minded colleagues to ignore the security and economic dimension of the Saudi-US relationship, one that excuses casual atrocity while affecting a broader concern for the human subject, a sentiment otherwise absent in broader strategic discussions.

Such a view is replicated in the Tuesday Global Magnitsky letter to Trump from Corker and ranking member, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), [requesting](#)

“that your determination specifically address whether Crown Prince Mohamed [sic] bin Salman is responsible for Mr Khashoggi’s murder.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is more businesslike in tone, suggesting that enough house cleaning has already taken place. The governing Saudi royal family is never mentioned; specific individuals are, a point that keeps the House of Saud distant from the bloody matter.

“We’ve sanctioned 17 people – some of them very senior in the Saudi government,” he told KCMO in Kansas City, Missouri.

Rounding off such an approach is the extravagant claim by Trump that he controls the levers, holds the strings, and is captain of the ship. The world is his market, his veritable playground. He can influence interest rates; he can control oil prices.

“Oil prices getting lower,” [he tweeted](#). “Great! Like a big Tax Cut for America and the World. Enjoy!”

Khashoggi should be remembered as much as the victim of state-sanctioned murder as one of unjust ennoblement at the hands of his morally infatuated exploiters. Trump’s diminution of his fate is crude but violently frank: the US has preferred a different approach to other states whose governments have seemed fit to suspend arms sales. All will quietly normalise matters in due course, keen to avoid losing market share to competitors. “Enjoy!” as Trump might well toot, followed by triumphant tones of “Told you so!”

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