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by JOSEPH GROSSO  
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## The Long and Winding Road: the U.S.-Saudi Alliance



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Last November, in a rare bipartisan though ultimately half-hearted display, the House of Representatives voted 366-30 to declare that Congress has not authorized U.S. support for the Saudi-led war against the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. The resolution acknowledged that “Congress has not enacted specific legislation authorizing the use of military force against parties participating in the Yemeni civil war that are not otherwise subject to the Authorization of Use of Military Force or the Authorization of Use of Military Force in

Iraq” but took no further action such as cutting off funding . It also particularly condemned Iran’s support for the Houthis without specifically citing the House of Saud’s much more prominent role.

Just over a month ago the Senate failed to pass its own resolution directing the removal of U.S. armed forces in Yemen that haven’t been authorized by Congress. In a 55-45 vote, the Senate determined that the U.S. could continue to provide logistical assistance and refueling for the Saudi bombing campaign. It has been Saudi bombing, along with a Saudi-led blockade of Yemeni ports, which has claimed the bulk of the more than 13,500 lives lost since the war started three years ago. Since the war’s inception a million people have contracted cholera and about 20 million out of a pre-war population of 28 million need humanitarian assistance for their basic needs.

Such is the nature of the American-Saudi alliance. The alliance originated with a 1945 meeting Roosevelt, on his way home from Yalta, had with Saudi king Abdul Aziz ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy. The Saudis would keep the oil flowing and the U.S. would overlook provide the defense. However, ever since 9/11, when 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals, there has been a general, and understandable, sentiment with the American public that something is amiss. Donald Trump ranted on during his campaign such as the Obama administration’s opposition to the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, allowing families of 9/11 victims to sue the Saudi government, Obama’s veto was the only one of his vetoes ever overridden by Congress, and the largess the Saudis have lavished on the Clintons over time- about \$10 million for Clinton’s presidential library (George W. Bush got about the same amount for his library) and more than \$10 million, perhaps up to \$25 million, for the Clinton Foundation. If Henry Kissinger is never to face a true reckoning for the destruction he unleashed and abetted all around the globe, one could at least wish he was more tarnished for resigning as head of the 9/11 Commission rather than potentially revealing the client list of Kissinger Associates, Inc. All it took was a bit of pomp and circumstance (the Saudis spent an estimated \$68 million on flattery) on a visit to the kingdom for Trump to flip and approve a \$110 billion arms sale intent, and reaffirm the House of Saud as bedrock of American hegemony in the Middle East. Trump followed a pattern established by Obama himself. Back in 2002 he labeled the Saudi government a ‘so-called ally’. Over the eight years of his presidency his administration offered the Saudis over \$115 billion in arms, more than any previous administration, and backed the Saudi campaign in Yemen. And lest it be

forgotten during the Obama years the House of Saud was the main pillar for counter-revolution during the Arab Spring.

Those old enough to have experienced the run-up to the invasion of Iraq may recall it wasn't supposed to go this way. The war was supposed to change everything. The neocons were ascendant and Leo Strauss, with his alleged endorsements of noble Platonic lies and rule by brilliant elites, was their inspiration. Paul Wolfowitz was Deputy Secretary of Defense and making a cameo in Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein* as Phillip Gorman, where Bellow's description of phone briefings Gorman gave his mentor Ravelstein (Allan Bloom) comically read thus: 'And it was essential to fit up-to-the-minute decisions in the Gulf War- made by obviously limited pols like Bush and Baker into a true-as-possible picture of the forces as work- into the political history of this civilization. When Ravelstein said that young Gorman had a grasp of Great Politics, something like this was what he had in mind.'

Christopher Hitchens would wink at this sentiment in a piece he titled *Machiavelli in Mesopotamia* writing: 'Part of the charm of the regime-change argument (from the point of view of its supporters) is that it depends on premises and objectives that cannot, at least by the administration, be publicly avowed. Since Paul Wolfowitz is from the intellectual school of Leo Strauss—and appears in fictional guise as such in Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein*—one may even suppose that he enjoys this arcane and occluded aspect of the debate.' Indeed it was Wolfowitz who admitted to *Vanity Fair* that the Bush administration zeroed in on Iraq's alleged WMDs for what he called 'bureaucratic reasons', saying 'we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was one reason everyone could agree on.' Hitchens, for his part, assured readers that given the 'chief opponents of a "regime change" strategy are in fact conservatives', including the friends of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, that tide of reaction had turned—a liberated Iraq with oil to export meant the House of Saud's relationship with the West was on borrowed time. Fifteen years and countless deaths later and the relationship remains undaunted. Fracking and the requisite 'energy independence' was the next candidate to cut the knot. Despite increasing ecological damage fracking too has been unable to move the needle.

The current, official justification for the alliance's permanence is Iran, a country that has signed, and has since been certified to be complying with, a nuclear weapon's treaty with the U.S. and European Union. The Iranian government, both before and after the Islamic Revolution that overthrew American backed Shah, has long been repressive domestically and Iran's foreign policy is certainly not enlightened, yet in neither arena has it held a

candle to Saudi Arabia. For decades the Saudi government has been more despotic and has spent tens of billions of dollars spreading Wahhabism, the most primitive strain of Islam, everywhere there are Muslims, disrupting local Islamic traditions and increasing toxic sectarianism from Pakistan (of course with American aid), to Nigeria, Indonesia, and many other places.

Today Saudi Arabia is now basically ruled by 32-year-old crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, son of King Salman (bin Salman also holds the titles of Defense Minister, chief of economic development, and head of the state oil company Aramco). Bin Salman has marketed himself as a reformer having just completed a three week tour of the U.S. encompassing visits to five states, five newspapers, and sit downs with four presidents along with the likes of Michael Bloomberg and Oprah Winfrey. Bin Salman has announced that starting in June women will be able to drive cars independent of male chaperones. Apparently movie theaters are opening though perhaps still with separate seating for men and women. Bin Salman has also been touting what he calls Vision 2030, an economic plan meant to diversify the Saudi economy and thereby wean it off oil (while 75 percent of Saudi citizens get paychecks from the state, poorer migrants from abroad grind out 84 percent of the real jobs). He has pledged to 'return' to a more moderate Islam. Activists are skeptical as early returns suggest the crackdown in Saudi Arabia has come down on reformers rather than hardliners.

In a much publicized move last November, bin Salman had much of the old elite locked away in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton in what the government called an anti-corruption drive. No official charges were made public and it wasn't clarified who was found guilty or innocent of what. Corruption has long been endemic, bin Salman himself has a yacht that cost over a half billion and a \$300 million gold-encrusted châteauneur Versailles that he insists he paid for with his own money. He also reportedly was the anonymous buyer of Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* that fetched \$450.3 million. It seems at least part of the intention for the clampdown was to grab back billions of shady inheritance money from the children (bin Salman's half cousins) of the late monarch King Abdullah. The *New York Times* reports that deceased king set up the Abdullah Foundation to fund building projects in his name. When he died in 2015 the king's 30 children made out quite well from the fund and the current rulers want some of it back. As many as 17 detainees at the hotel required medical treatment for abuse by their captors including a Maj. Gen. Ali al-Qahtani whose corpse was seen with an unnaturally twisted neck. The operation strong-armed \$106 billion worth of settlements though apparently only a small amount has been

actually seized given the elite preference for off-shore banking. Trump tweeted his two cents with: ‘I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing’ and ‘Some of those they are harshly treating have been “milking” their country for years!’

Meanwhile, a UN panel has judged that 60 academics, journalists, and human rights activists have been arbitrarily imprisoned since last September as bin Salman eliminates any potential opponents. The war in Yemen rages on and the Saudi government has led the blockade of Qatar. The blockade was sparked by what U.S. intelligence concludes were phony quotes attributed to Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, created by hackers working for the United Arab Emirates. The blockage too received a supportive Trump tweet- one line of speculation is support for the blockage is rooted in Jared Kushner’s anger that Qatar’s finance minister, in New York last April to explore new investment opportunities, turned down the chance to rescue the Kushner family’s failing signature building in Manhattan 666 Fifth Avenue.

It was Lord Byron who had the prophetic touch about this back around 1812, writing in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* about Wahhabism’s takeover of the peninsula in conjunction with the dominant Al-Saud tribe:

Or Wahab’s rebel brood, who dared divest  
The prophet’s tomb of all its pious soil,  
May wind their path of blood along the West;  
But ne’er will freedom seek this fated soil,  
But slave succeed to slave through years of endless toil.

What Byron couldn’t foresee was just how complicit the West would be in such a system; looking at continuing American statecraft in the region the toil figures to remain endless.