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The Khashoggi Affair and the Anti-Iran Axis

I've argued that the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia comprise an axis (a true "Axis of Evil") united (for very different reasons) in opposition to Iran. The Saudi king has urged Washington to topple the Islamic Republic, which it considers heretical and the fountainhead of regional Shiite militancy. Robert Gates (Defense Secretary 2006-11) recalled meeting the late Saudi King Abdullah and recorded that "He wanted a full-scale attack on Iranian military targets, not just the nuclear sites."

Saudi Arabia has acknowledged that it has engaged in discussions with Israel about coordinating strategy against Iran. The axis is dangerous, a source of war. But it is isolated in the world. Most leaders want normal relations with Iran, understand the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Deal as a move towards war, and see Donald Trump, Binyamin Netanyahu and Prince Mohammad bin Salman alike as dangerously unhinged people. But the axis remains active for the time being.

Yet how can it survive the crown prince's apparent vile crime in ordering the murder of a Saudi journalist in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, by a hit squad of 15 Saudi assassins who brought a bone-saw to cut up the body for discreet removal? A crime caught on surveillance audio and video. This is sheer evil, evident to all. As Patrick Cockburn has pointed out, it's easier to get one's mind around a specific atrocity like Jamal Khashoggi's murder than to grasp the magnitude of, say, the Saudi war on Yemen that's taken 10,000 lives. This specific atrocity cries out for reaction.

Warmongering Sen. Lindsey Graham, always a pro-Saudi stalwart, now says that if the allegation is true, "It's a game-changer" and "There will be hell to pay."

That could mean a change in the game dating back to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's meeting with the Saudi king in 1945, cementing the ongoing cheap oil for arms arrangement. Sen. Rand Paul is calling for an end to arms sales to Saudi Arabia; but Trump says this would be "a very, very hard pill to swallow for our country" due to all those Boeing and Lockheed jobs involved. Still, it may be hard to sustain the current ("excellent") relationship.

The prince has been on the phone to his friend Jared Kushner, denying Saudi involvement in Khashoggi's disappearance. If Jared, Trump's point man on the Middle East, stands up for his buddy, he will be more discredited than he already is. If he breaks with him, the capacity for axis cooperation against Iran may be diminished. That would be good.

Former assistant secretary of state for public affairs John Kirby, CNN's "senior military and diplomatic analyst" says there has never been such a crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations. But he opines that it's a necessary crisis. For once I agree with him. The Saudi royal court headed by this cruel and reckless young man is a far greater threat to world peace than either the North Korean or Iranian regimes. And now its fundamental moral quality is revealed by this evil incident.

Perhaps the Saudi king will be obliged to depose his son and choose another successor. (Recall how Kim Jong-il deposed his heir apparent Kim Jong-nam after he embarrassed the family by trying to visit Disneyland in Tokyo using a fake passport in 2001.) King Salman will have far more reason than the North Korean leader to consider another choice. But he is old and doddering. His son is young, vigorous, and has already killed or jailed a dozen relatives. One expects a simmering power struggle in Riyadh, difficulties in the Saudi-Turkish relationship, a glitch in Saudi-Israeli cooperation, and welcome more scrutiny as his intimate relationship with MBS (and with MBS's relations with Israel and the Palestinians, and Saudi-Israeli cooperation on Iran, and on Syria where Israeli planes do not bomb Saudi-backed forces, etc.) becomes better revealed. Maybe even business ties will be investigated.

It is not looking good for the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel. But the rest of the world can rejoice that the prospect of war on Iran has probably lessened.