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## *After the Khashoggi Murder, It is Up To Israel to Repair the Crack in the Axis of Evil*



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On the domestic scene, there is Ted Cruz and Mitch McConnell and many others of a similar caliber, but among world leaders could there be anyone more loathsome than Donald Trump?

Because he has so many serious competitors, each of whom is loathsome in different ways, the question is impossible to answer. But Trump is “special” — thanks to the hand that the Electoral College, building on the work of Democratic Party losers and Hillary Clinton, dealt him.

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MBS, Mohammad bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, is special too.

Compared to those two, Benjamin Netanyahu looks almost like what he plainly is not, a decent human being.

But as the leader of a country that, along with Saudi Arabia and the United States, comprises an axis of evil in the Greater Middle East, his power is magnified, and therefore so is the harm he can do. He could, for example, bring America into a war with Iran. This would almost certainly take a catastrophic turn.

That prospect is less likely, however, the more fractured the axis becomes. This may turn out to be the silver lining in the savage murder of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

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His murder was horrifying, but so is much else that the Saudis do to those who fall out of favor with the monarchy's rulers; and so, of course, is the Saudi war in Yemen. However, only this one gruesome murder seems to have struck a nerve. Perhaps this is because the victim was well known to Western politicians and journalists.

His murder was unsettling enough to cause even the likes of Lindsey Graham and Marco Rubio to distance themselves, ever so delicately, from the sway of the conman to whom they, along with nearly all other Republican office-seekers and influence peddlers these days, pay homage. It was ghastly enough even to get the conman himself to send out words and tweets of regret.

Future historians will have no trouble explaining the outrage; its causes are obvious to anyone with normal human sensibilities.

This assumes, of course, that the world will survive Trump well enough for there to be future historians. It also assumes that, despite the enthusiasms of the crowds at Trump rallies, and despite the propagandizing and dumbing down that Fox News and other rightwing media do, that the moral and intellectual capacities of normal human beings will remain generally unimpaired.

So far, the country has gotten through nearly two years of Trump and is still, for the most part, not too seriously damaged. But there are at least two more years to go, and even if fortune smiles upon us and that longed for "blue wave" materializes, it won't help much.

If our luck nevertheless holds, future historians will wonder why the Khashoggi murder, but not, say, the more outrageous and far more lethal war that the Saudis are waging, with American help, in Yemen, or the many other greater and lesser assaults on international

law and basic human morality that have always been the stock and trade of the Saudi royal family, get a pass.

It is not as if the information isn't available or that nobody outside the Middle East cares. The problem is that American public opinion is indifferent. The Khashoggi murder could change this. Or not.

With American and other Western capitalists salivating at the prospect of the Saudis throwing money their way, and with the large Trump base becoming increasingly unhinged and vicious, a turn towards sanity is no slam-dunk.

After all, one of the very few things that Trump is good at is stirring up those “darker angels of our nature” that MSNBC and CNN pundits keep talking about. He is even better at that than he is at tax evasion and fraudulent dealings with workers and investors.

About the only thing that Democrats are good at, besides quashing radical initiatives and stifling progressive impulses, is racking up huge leads in polls and then losing to the more odious duopoly party.

Even so, it is still more likely than not that “the Desert Kingdom” – a theocracy ruled by some of the most retrograde and morally debased miscreants alive today – will, thanks to this latest atrocity, be so damaged in the eyes of right-thinking people the world over that not all the oil money in the world will ever make it right.

Time will tell. For now, it is still possible to believe that when the barbarism is severe enough and persists long enough, public opinion will eventually catch on, no matter how much money the rich and heinous throw around.

Future historians, if any, will also marvel at how liberals fell into line behind the Saudis before the Khashoggi murder. Could it be that they really are dumb enough to fall for the nonsense put out by the likes of Tom Friedman?

Those historians will also know more about the Trump Organization's business arrangements with MBS and other Gulf potentates than we now do. This is likely to make those who fell for the MBS charm offensive look even dumber.

That the United States is in league with Saudi Arabia is not exactly news; America has been throwing its weight around in ways detrimental to the historically Muslim world since the end of the Second World War. But now that Trump is in the White House, and Middle East policy is in the hands of Jared Kushner, his joined at the hip to Netanyahu son-in-law, the problem is worse than ever.

If the Trump Party loses ignominiously in the upcoming midterm elections, perhaps not all will be lost. Lately, though, prophets of doom – or are they just Democratic National

Committee fear mongers? — have taken to telling the world that the Trump Party might hold onto power even in the House. They say that Trump’s misogyny, racism and overall vileness has aroused the enthusiasm of his base enough to overwhelm the enthusiasm of the anti-Trump “resistance.”

They may be right. It does look like formerly quiescent, morbidly desperate people who used to be only privately mean-spirited now think that body slamming reporters and sending pipe bombs to “liberal” news organizations and Democrats is cool. Those purported “populists” even think, on Trump’s word, that Brett Kavanaugh, late of Georgetown Prep and Yale, is God’s gift to the workingman.

We will know soon enough how well Trump’s strategy of riling up his base, all others be damned, will work.

We will know too how much, if at all, it matters that, in our so-called “democracy,” the majority of Americans, like the majority of people the world over, understand full well that Trump’s cult-like followers are mostly deluded thugs and that Trump himself is a laughing stock.

We will know to what extent ours has become a minority rule political culture, a veritable kakistocracy.

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Like the others, the third member of the Middle East’s axis of evil, Israel, gets away with murder, both figuratively and literally, too.

But because Israel is a state with no territorial ambitions outside Palestine and no prospect of becoming a regional economic power, and because it is still a democracy of a sort, a Herrenvolk democracy, despite years of rightwing rule, its atrocities are confined, for the most part, to its own sliver of the world.

Nevertheless, its effect on world affairs is extensive and profound.

Israel and Saudi Arabia used to be mortal enemies. Though hardly close friends now, they have become de facto allies.

To make their mark on the world, they are both utterly dependent on the United States. The United States depends on Saudi Arabia for its oil, for the financial clout its oil makes possible, and for keeping the global oil market on track in ways that accord with America’s global interests. Israel has nothing comparable to offer the United States – it is no longer even useful as an off-shore military base — but the political clout of the Israel lobby, both Jewish and Evangelical Christian, more than makes up for the deficit.

I believe that these lobbies, the Jewish one especially, are paper tigers and that this will become apparent to everyone if and when they are boldly defied. But the American political class thinks differently, and that is all that matters.

In any case, their relations with the United States are not what is holding them together. Their animosity towards Iran is the reason for that.

The United States has it in for Iran in large part because its foreign policy establishment holds a grudge for the humiliation America suffered during the hostage crisis four decades ago.

To be sure, the United States is, for the most part, just what as Gore Vidal famously said it was, the United States of Amnesia. The bromance now flourishing between two of our most loathsome domestic political figures, Trump and Ted Cruz, attests to that.

But, like everything else in the Middle East, the situation is complicated. At the same time, that, on most matters, the past might as well never have happened, the hegemon's memory is long when its global dominance is challenged.

Therefore, whenever it is convenient to vilify Iran, American politicians generally will do precisely that. Even thoughtful ones, like Barack Obama, after trying meekly to chart a new course in American-Iranian relations, beat a hasty retreat at the first signs of trouble.

The Saudis have it in for Iran – and Turkey too, to a lesser extent – because, despite the retrograde nature of their regime, they want to become the regional hegemon for the entire Middle East, not just the Arabian Peninsula.

But great power politics is not the whole story. Saudi Arabia and Iran are rival theocracies; their animosities therefore transcend the bounds of Reason, passing over, as religious conflicts often do, into a realm where irrational fervor sometimes overwhelms calculations of economic and national interest.

Israel's problem with Iran is different. It has no hegemonic aspirations; it is happy for the United States to monopolize that. And although secularism is in retreat in Israel, the country is still far from becoming a theocracy.

It is relevant too that in Jewish lore, Persia (Iran) has always been held in high regard. The thinking of the European Jews who colonized Palestine was, of course, affected by Orientalist attitudes, but, like other Europeans, European Jews generally held Persians in higher regard than the Arabic speaking peoples under Ottoman – and later British and French – rule.

In short, Israel and Iran are neither natural nor historical enemies.

But to flourish and perhaps even to survive, Israel needs enemies; it always has and as long as it purports to be a Jewish state, it always will. With anti-Semitism on the wane, despite what Zionists would like the world to think, it therefore needs to concoct credible “existential threats.” Iran is its best, perhaps its only, chance for that.

There is a reasonable debate to be had about whether anti-Semitism made or still makes Zionism necessary. There is no doubt, however, that it made it possible.

By “anti-Semitism,” I mean hatred of Jews. The term is unfortunate because “Semite” is a linguistic, not an ethnic, category, and because most of today’s purported anti-Semites are “Semites” themselves. But the word is in common use, and there is no getting around it.

Anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism are not the same. Anti-Judaism has existed at least since Roman times, and is a mainstay of the other two “Abrahamic” religions, Christianity and Islam. It could hardly be otherwise, inasmuch as each of them understands itself to be the legitimate and unique successor of the religion of ancient Israel.

Since theological animosities sometimes shade over into animosities towards theological opponents, anti-Semitism, in the largest sense, has also been around since ancient times. But the anti-Semitism that made Zionism possible, and perhaps also necessary, the kind that is based on eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century notions of “race,” is a European concoction and a creature of the modern world.

Jews fared better under Islam than they did in Christendom, and modern anti-Semitism owes a great deal to Christian anti-Judaism. Muslim anti-Judaism, such as it is, has had almost nothing to do with the rise of modern anti-Semitism or with its nature.

Apologists for Israel nowadays struggle to conflate occasional expressions of anti-Zionist outrage in suburban quarters of European cities with the anti-Semitism that led to the Final Solution. There are a lot of susceptible people in the world these days begging to be fooled, but, in the end, theirs is a fool’s errand.

It should go without saying that anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are historically and conceptually distinct.

The original Zionist idea was that anti-Semitism would always be with us and that, if only for the sake of self-defense, the Jewish people need a state of their own. The idea that this state had to be in Palestine came later, as did the idea that support for a Jewish state in Palestine is an expression of Jewish identity.

Indeed, it was once a widely accepted tenet of the Jewish religion that, until the Messiah comes, Palestine was to be a holy land, not a homeland. This is still the view of many extreme orthodox Jews today.

It was a holy land too for Old Testament besotted Anglo-Protestants and Lutherans in Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

Indeed, Anglo-Protestant “dispensationalist” theologians in the nineteenth century were the first to give the “return” of the Jews to Palestine an expressly political inflection; they were political Zionists a good half century before the idea gained a foothold in Jewish circles.

Their theology had a profoundly anti-Semitic cast, however; before Christ could come a second time, they argued, Jews would have to accept Christ or else face an eternity in Hell. There is little doubt that most of them were rooting for the latter option. It took a while, but Jewish Zionists, always on the lookout for allies who could help them sway the U.S. government their way, decided not to mind.

To be sure, what started out as a reaction to European anti-Semitism did, in the course of time, take on different colorations. By now, Zionism is mainly a form of Jewish identity politics, with the nation serving as a substitute for God.

But nations are not part of the furniture of the world; they are socially and politically constructed. This is especially true of the Jewish nation, formed from peoples who share a common religion, but not a common language, except liturgical Hebrew and Aramaic, a shared history or a shared land. Jewish nationalism is a slender reed upon which to base Zionist theory and practice.

Why even bother trying unless circumstances make the construction of a Jewish national identity morally imperative?

This is why, some hundred and twenty years after Theodor Herzl published *Der Judenstaat*, Israel’s first reason for being remains its best – anti-Semitism.

But although anti-Zionism, like anti-Judaism, can and sometimes does slide over into anti-Semitism, and although Zionists have worked hard to keep the fear of anti-Semitism alive, there just isn’t enough of the genuine article around anymore to justify all the harm that the state of Israel does.

But existential threats will do instead, and if they don’t exist, it will therefore be necessary to create them.

Real threats to the ethnocentric character of the Jewish state — voluntary emigration, for example, or population drift due to low Jewish birthrates, especially among the Ashkenazi (European) Jews who founded the state — don’t cut it. They are no more “threatening” than intermarriage between Gentiles and Jews in the United States and other Western countries.

Palestinians under occupation and in exile used to serve the purpose, but, by now, they are too politically divided, too abandoned by the world, and too militarily feeble to fool anybody who is not begging to be fooled.

And, of course, the Saudis and the Arab regimes they control are of no use either; they have become Israel's friend – not officially, but in ways too obvious to hide.

Jordan is and always has been useless, and after the Bush-Cheney war of choice in Iraq, Iraq now is too. Then came the utter and complete mess that the Obama administration, led on by the always inept Hillary Clinton and the liberal imperialists she and Obama empowered, made of Libya and Egypt, and, worst of all, Syria.

And so, Iran is all that is left.

Netanyahu is obsessed with Iran, and therefore so is Trump. He may aspire to be the Absolute Leader of the Universe but, in fact, he dares not displease Sheldon Adelson and the Israel lobby leads him around by the nose.

Adelson, by the way, is living proof that classical anti-Semitism is finished in the United States. The man is a character right out of the pages of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and yet nobody, even in so-called “alt-right” (quasi or bona fide fascist) circles seems to care.

Netanyahu has the bomb and he has the Israel lobby, but he doesn't have anything like the Saudis' money; and, in capitalist America, money talks.

But after the Khashoggi murder it may not talk loud enough.

Therefore, if Netanyahu is to succeed in getting America to go to war with Iran, he may have to do the heavy lifting himself. Is he up to the task? Don't count on it.

Let's hope instead that Israel's inherent weakness and Netanyahu's own ineptitude does him in along with his even more odious axis of evil partners, and ultimately the axis itself.