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The Donald's Risible Rendezvous in Riyadh

By David Stockman
May 22, 2017

If the Donald had thrown a dart at the world map blindfolded, he could not have picked a worse stop than Riyadh for his maiden foreign journey. That's because there isn't one anywhere on the planet.

The Saudi capital is the very heart of darkness – the seat of an absolutist tyranny that has nothing to do with America's interests or ideals and has everything to do with fomenting the violent conflicts and economic deformations that plague the region.

The House of Saud fosters Wahhabi fanaticism, exports jihadi violence and completely disenfranchises its 32 million inhabitants. So doing, it squanders its magnificent geologic patrimony on the unspeakable opulence of the royal family and an insane level of arms purchases and military capability that inherently and unnecessarily destabilizes the region.

As Justin Raimondo so cogently summarized,

Has there been a more disgusting spectacle during the four months of this presidency than the sight of Donald Trump slobbering all over the barbarous Saudi monarch and his murderous family of petty princelings? It's enough to make any normal American retch, especially when one remembers what Trump said about them during the election.....

The old Trump told us that the Saudis were “mouth pieces, bullies, cowards,” who were “paying ISIS” but now they’re our partners in the “war on terrorism.”

So the rambling platitudes of Trump’s speech did not essay a way forward to eliminate ISIS or stanch the fires of war, ruin, death and dispossession that are consuming Muslim lands from Tripoli to Kabul. To the contrary, they amounted to strategic mush and hypocritical pandering that could have been written by Saudi Arabia’s PR agency or maybe its hired Washington flaks. Tony Podesta and his \$200k per month retainer anyone?

Worse still, the speech’s final peroration vilifying Iran came straight from the Bibi Netanyahu branch of the War Party. It was not only a gratuitous rebuke to the 40 million Iranians who Friday overwhelmingly voted to continue the enlightened, outward looking policies of President Rouhani, but also was effectively a clarion call to more sectarian warfare and terrorism in the region, not its diminution.

The reason is elemental. The American people have no dog in the hunt when it comes to the clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the ancient Sunni/Shiite divide which animates it.

The way out of Washington’s ruinous, 27-year military intervention in the middle east is to stay out of a sectarian battle and political rivalry that fuels Sunni jihadism, weakens the natural Shiite resistance and fosters the kind of vengeful blowback that can eventuate in terrorist threats to the US homeland.

The heart of the matter is the War Party’s claim that Iran is a massive and relentless state sponsor of terrorism. That is a giant lie, yet Trump lip-synched it’s deceitful anthem chapter and verse:

But no discussion of stamping out [the threat of terrorism] would be complete without mentioning the government that gives terrorists all three – safe harbor, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment. It is a regime that is responsible for so much instability in the region. I am speaking of course of Iran.

From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.

The place to start is with the map below – a picture worth a thousand words if there ever was such. Not one of the 40 US bases pictured below adds to the safety and security of the citizens of Springfield MA, Lincoln NE or Spokane WA.

They are merely outposts of Imperial Washington’s half-century old error that treats the Persian Gulf as an American Lake and supposes that meddling in the internecine political, ethnic and sectarian conflicts of the region engenders peace and stability. In fact, it has left behind a trail of broken states, ruined economies, demolished cities and towns and disposed peoples, desperate refugees and revenge-obsessed young men.

At the same time, this implacably threatening military encirclement does explain the Iranian regime's hostility to America and fear that it is the next target for one of Washington's bloody exercises in regime change. That's been especially true ever since George Bush's idiotic consignment of Iran to the "Axis of Evil" in his 2002 speech to Congress – at the very time after the 9/11 attack by Sunni jihadists that Shiite Iran had come to America's aid in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Indeed, even a passing acquaintance with recent history reminds us of why the halls of government in Tehran do not ring with encomiums to America's great works in the region. After all, it was the CIA coup of 1953 which overthrew Iran's elected government and saddled it's people with the brutal, plunderous rule of the Shah for the next 25-years.

Likewise, it was Washington that sided with Saddam Hussein's 1980's war on Iran. In fact, the CIA provided the satellite reconnaissance that enabled him to drop horrific chemical weapons on Iran's unprotected and often barely armed teen-aged armies.

So too, it was the neocon doctrines concocted by Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz in the early 1990s that designated Iran as the surrogate enemy for the departed Soviet Union; and which went on to endlessly accuse it of a dangerous nuclear weaponization program which it never had – even by the lights of the NIE's (National Intelligence Estimates) produced by Washington's 17 intelligence agencies in 2008 and thereafter.

Indeed, the map betrays another element of the Big Lie that the Donald echoed in Riyadh. Iran is not a state sponsor of terrorism in any more meaningful sense of the word than is America, for instance, owing to the \$1.5 billion per year subvention it provides to the murderous Egyptian regime of General al-Sissi, who sat among the "allies" in the Saudi rendezvous of malefactors, tyrants and butchers.

Instead, Iran has a *foreign policy* like other nation states – and one that aligns with confessional affinities that long predated Washington's blundering in the Middle East, and indeed even the very existence of the American Republic.

That is, Iran is the epicenter of the Shiite Crescent that extends to the Shiite heartland of lower Iraq, their Alawite cousins in the Assad-controlled regions of Syria, the Shiite-based Hezbollah movement of southern Lebanon and the ancient Shiite/Houthi lands of northern Yemen.

This is not an alliance of Iranian-led terrorism; it's a self-defense alignment of Shiite nations and politics against the aggressive assaults of Saudi Arabia and its jihadists proxies and mercenaries in these areas.

Start with Iran's long-standing support of Bashir Assad's government in Syria. That alliance goes back to his father's era and is rooted in the historic confessional politics of the Islamic world. The Assad regime is Alawite, a branch of the Shiites, and despite the regime's brutality, it has been a bulwark of protection for all of Syria's minority sects, including Christians, against a

majority-Sunni ethnic cleansing. The latter would surely occur if the Saudi-supported rebels, led by the Nusra Front and ISIS, were ever to take full power.

Likewise, the fact that the Baghdad government of the broken state of Iraq – that is, the artificial 1916 concoction of two striped-pants European diplomats (Messrs. Sykes and Picot of the British and French foreign offices, respectively) – is now aligned with Iran is also a result of confessional politics and geo-economic propinquity.

For all practical purposes, the state of Iraq has been destroyed by Washington's two military interventions since 1990, and has now been partitioned.

The Kurds of the northeast are a functionally independent polity and have been collecting their own oil revenue for the past four years and operate their own security forces. And the western Sunni lands of the upper Euphrates, of course, have been conquered by ISIS with American weapons dropped in place by the hapless \$25 billion Iraqi army minted by Washington's departing proconsuls.

Accordingly, what is left of Iraq is a population that is overwhelmingly Shiite and nurses bitter resentments after two decades of violent conflict with the Sunni forces. Why in the world, therefore, wouldn't they ally with their Shiite neighbor? And why is it a mystery that Baghdad is aligned with Assad in Syria, not the Sunni terrorists being trained and armed by Washington and Riyadh.

Similarly, the claim that Iran is now trying to annex Yemen is pure claptrap. The ancient territory of Yemen has been racked by civil war off and on since the early 1970s. And a major driving force of that conflict has been confessional differences between the Sunni South and the Shiite/Houthi North.

In more recent times, Washington's blatant drone war inside Yemen against alleged terrorists and its domination and financing of Yemen's government eventually produced the same old outcome – that is, another failed state and an illegitimate government that fled at the 11th hour, leaving another vast cache of American arms and equipment behind.

Accordingly, the Houthis forces now in control of substantial parts of the country are not some kind of advanced guard sent in by Tehran. They are indigenous partisans who share a confessional tie with Iran, but who have actually been armed, if inadvertently, by the United States. And the real invader in this destructive civil war is Saudi Arabia.

Armed with American weaponry and advisors, it has viciously bombed civilian populations controlled by the Houthi and areas loyal to the former Sunni President. The Saudi campaign since 2015 is responsible for more than 4,000 deaths and 10,000 injured and maimed civilian men, women and children. These are outright war crimes if the word has any meaning at all.

Finally, there is the fourth element of the purported Iranian axis – the Hezbollah-controlled Shiite communities of southern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. Like everything else in the

Middle East, Hezbollah is a product of historical European imperialism, Islamic confessional politics and the frequently misguided and counterproductive security policies of Israel.

In the first place, Lebanon was not any more a real country than Iraq was when Sykes and Picot laid their straight-edged rulers on a map. The result was a stew of religious and ethnic divisions – Maronite Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Copts, Druse, Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, Kurds, Armenians, Jews and countless more – that made the fashioning of a viable state virtually impossible.

At length, an alliance of Christians and Sunnis gained control of the country, leaving the 40% Shiite population disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged, as well.

But it was the inflow of Palestinian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s that eventually upset the balance of sectarian forces and triggered a civil war that essentially lasted from 1975 until the turn of the century. It also triggered a catastrophically wrong-headed Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982, and a subsequent repressive occupation of mostly Shiite territories for the next 18 years.

The alleged purpose of this invasion was to chase the PLO and Yasser Arafat out of the enclave in southern Lebanon that they had established after being driven out of Jordan in 1970. Eventually Israel succeeded in sending Arafat packing to North Africa, but in the process created a militant, Shiite-based resistance movement that did not even exist in 1982 and that in due course became the strongest single force in Lebanon's fractured domestic political arrangements.

After Israel withdrew in 2000, the then-Christian president of the country made abundantly clear that Hezbollah had become a legitimate and respected force within the Lebanese polity, not merely some subversive agent of Tehran:

"For us Lebanese, and I can tell you the majority of Lebanese, Hezbollah is a national resistance movement. If it wasn't for them, we couldn't have liberated our land. And because of that, we have big esteem for the Hezbollah movement".

So, yes, Hezbollah is an integral component of the so-called Shiite Crescent, and its confessional and political alignment with Tehran is entirely plausible. But that arrangement – however uncomfortable for Israel – does not represent unprovoked Iranian aggression on Israel's northern border.

Instead, it's actually the blowback from the stubborn refusal of Israeli governments – especially the right-wing Likud governments of modern times – to deal constructively with the Palestinian question. In lieu of a two-state solution in the territory of Palestine, therefore, Israeli policy has produced a chronic state of confrontation and war with the huge share of the Lebanese population represented by Hezbollah.

The latter is surely no agency of peaceful governance and has committed its share of atrocities. But the point at hand is that given the last 35 years of history and Israeli policy, Hezbollah would

exist as a menacing force on its northern border even if the Iranian theocracy didn't exist and the shah or his heir was still on the Peacock Throne.

In short, there is no alliance of terrorism in the Shiite Crescent that threatens American security. That proposition is simply one of the big lies that was promulgated by the War Party after 1991 and that has been happily embraced by Imperial Washington since then in order to keep the military-industrial-security complex alive, and justify its self-appointed role as policeman of the world.

At the root of Sunni-based terrorism is the long-standing Washington error that America's security and economic well-being depend upon keeping an armada in the Persian Gulf in order to protect the surrounding oil fields and the flow of tankers through the straits of Hormuz.

But that doctrine has been wrong from the day it was officially enunciated by one of America's great economic ignoramuses, Henry Kissinger, at the time of the original oil crisis in 1973. The 43 years since then have proven in spades that it doesn't matter who controls the oil fields, and that the only effective cure for high oil prices is the free market, not the 5th Fleet.

Every tin pot dictatorship from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, to Saddam Hussein, to the bloody-minded chieftains of Nigeria, to the purportedly medieval mullahs and fanatical revolutionary guards of Iran has produced oil – and all they could because they desperately needed the revenue. For crying out loud, even the barbaric thugs of ISIS extract every possible drop of petroleum from the tiny, wheezing oil fields scattered around their backwater domain that have not yet been bombed to smithereens by Washington.

So there is no economic case whatsoever for Imperial Washington's massive military presence in the Middle East, and most especially for its longtime alliance with the despicable regime of Saudi Arabia.

The Donald got the whole thing wrong from top to bottom. The way to defeat ISIS is to allow its bitter, 13-centuries old enemies in the Shiite Crescent to finish off the job – which they have the will and military capacity to accomplish in short order.

Then Washington needs to get out of the Persian Gulf, abandon its 40 bases in the Middle East, and leave the decadent tyrants of Riyadh – who made a complete knave of the Donald this weekend – to the tender mercies of their own long-suffering populations.

Even the prospect of Washington cutting its ties would be more than enough to liberate the region from the Saudi plague. The princes would be on their 747s headed for Switzerland in a heartbeat.