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Return to Realpolitik: Trump in Saudi Arabia

By Binoy Kampmark

May 24, 2017

“You are a unique personality that is capable of doing the impossible.”

— President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to President Donald Trump, *New York Times*, May 21, 2017

The business of making money on property, badly, has shifted to the business of making money, greatly, for the US industrial arms complex. This is the technique of President Donald Trump, who has been making various gestures, sword and wallet in hand, to various selected allies in the Middle East.

Besieged domestically, Trump did what other predecessors have done: find solace in the turmoil of Middle Eastern politics. On Saturday, he sealed a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, one that will include Lockheed Martin missile defence systems, BAE combat vehicles and Raytheon bombs.[1] With characteristic hyperbole, he mentioned the “hundreds of billions of dollars of investments into the United States and jobs, jobs, jobs. So I would like to thank all of the people of Saudi Arabia.”

Admirably, Trump never lets political awareness of a theocracy, or any state system, however brutal, get in the way of the cash heavy deal. Whether such an ally deals in punitive amputation,

state sanctioned misogyny or the funding of devastating, destabilising wars, a US ally will be well treated.

On Sunday, Trump moved to soften the stance he had taken as an electoral war horse. Having deemed Islam the threatening bugbear of Western values in the lead-up to his nomination as the GOP Presidential candidate, he was now conciliatory to friends, hard on designated foes.

“This is not a battle between different faiths, different sects or different civilizations. This is a battle between barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life and decent people, all in the name of religion, people that want to protect life and want to protect their religion. That is the battle between good and evil.”

Gone was the fragile, sanctimony of human rights chatter, the hypocrisies that tend to accompany every US delegation prompted by a moral tic or humanitarian reserve. In such a moral universe, foreign intervention, arms sales and destabilisation can still occur, provided it is deodorised by the cheap trick of humanity.

The moral tic became particularly aggressive when the Obama administration suspended a sale of nearly \$400 million in weapons to Saudi Arabia after the bombing of a funeral hall in Yemen’s capital, Sanaa last October.

Did such a move mean much? Kristine Beckerle of Human Rights Watch, writing for *The Hill*, thought so, mounting a far from convincing case. “After the funeral bombing, unlawful airstrikes continued, but the decision to suspend arms sales sent an important message to the Saudis.”[2]

Messages, weighed down by their meaningless, should still be sent in the pantomime of human rights discourse, if for no other reason to confirm that great illusion that US foreign policy remains both power and cant.

That particular cant is bound to find form in proposed amendments made by lawmakers requiring the White House to certify that the use of US weaponry be done appropriately. “Saudi Arabia,” noted Senator Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) in a statement, “is an important partner, but we must acknowledge when a friend’s actions aren’t in our national interest.”[3] Kill with our weapons, by all means, but do so with a tolerable degree of observance for the laws of war.

For Trump, such matters would have been, not so much hypocritical as unnecessary. What mattered was the sound of money and the elimination of cartoon enemies, even as he spoke to an audience mindful of their achievements in rolling back the Arab Spring.

To combat such enemies as Islamic State required adjustments in tone and speech, avoiding the altogether heavy hooch of “radical Islamic terrorism” for the more watered down brew of “Islamist extremism.”

This purely cosmetic move was no doubt deemed necessary since Trump could hardly tell his hosts and recent purchasers of US hardware that they were progenitors of a species of radicalism

as odious as any other. Those listening were waiting for the verbal dance on what “extremism” he would be talking about.

For all the preparatory caution, Trump could still make the point that the Islamic world, along with the US and its allies, would have to confront “the crisis of Islamic extremism and the Islamists and Islamic terror of all kinds.” A few in the audience would have been left squirming.

While local press outlets in the United States were churning in transfixed fashion on the latest Comey-Russian saga, a perfect cover had been provided for a deal that tilts the US into a terrain that is less varnished in its brutal aspirations. This was Trump more controlled than before, one away from the noisy press corps. (The press were fairly muzzled on this occasion.) Basking in the glow of authoritarianism, he seemed at ease, one might even say, at home.

Notes.

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-arms-exclusive-idUSKBN18124K>

[2] <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/334339-why-is-trump-rewarding-saudi-war-crimes-with-more-weapons>

[3] <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/276114-senate-resolution-would-limit-weapons-sales-to-saudi-arabia>