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## Trump and the New Mideast Paradox

By Alastair Crooke

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In the early 1920s, an ambitious young British official, Harry Philby, urged a Saudi leader (not then a king) to be bold: He could seize the leadership of the Arab world (using fired-up, Wahhabist forces), and become a true “king.” But first, it was absolutely essential he win British government support for his project; and secondly, the Saudi leader would need to change the image of his peripatetic, mounted marauders – the murderous *Ikhwan*. Abdul Aziz (in the West, often called Ibn Saud, the first king of Saudi Arabia) succeeded in both (though the latter, he simply had murdered by the British).

In 2016, an ambitious Gulf prince, Mohammad bin Zayed, urged a young Saudi (would-be king) to be bold: He could seize the leadership of the Sunni Arab world (using fired-up Sunni forces), and become the dominant power over the Arab world; but first, it was absolutely essential he win Israeli support for his ambition (as this would deliver U.S. consent); and secondly, he must change the image of Saudi Arabia from its Islamist identity, to one more tuned to the Western, financialized, global sphere. Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), a grandson of Abdul Aziz or Ibn Saud, may achieve neither. Why? Because none of the actors in this re-run of history are perhaps as strong as they may think they are.

“From the first greetings, Philby was charmed by the Saudi leader,” according to an historical account, and ultimately, he was to convert to Wahhabism, and pass his waning years at the

“Court” of the then king. Saudi “royalty” and its unrestrained profligacy has always had a curiously powerful allure for the Anglo-American élites. And it is clear that Trump was similarly charmed during his Riyadh visit (to the extent of overriding his Defense and State department secretaries – preferring instead to embrace bin Salman’s attempt to implode Qatar politically, and to leave Secretaries Tillerson’s and Mattis’s attempts at mediation in the Gulf dispute, twisting uneasily in the wind, with their pronouncements said by a White House official to be “their opinion,” as opposed to the Presidential, tweeted *dictum*).

The result has been a mess for American diplomacy — one that may entail adverse geo-political consequences (for the U.S.). What went wrong? It seems that all sides in this affair oversold their capacities to deliver, and that the “West Wing” became carried away with the dizzy prospect of a U.S.-led Sunni–Israeli coalition that would defeat ISIS, roll–back Iran, “manage away” the Palestinian “issue” from the table of disputes, and give Trump his foreign policy credentials.

### **The Saudi-Israel Deal**

The contours of this project were that an MbS-led Saudi Arabia would move incrementally towards recognizing Israel, while in parallel, quietly secularizing its Islam, through the embrace of liberal economics (in order to whittle away American Congress hostility towards the kingdom). And, bin Salman would lead a region-wide, Sunni jihad against Iran, rolling back its influence. And, under the pretext of fighting “terrorism,” land a blow on Qatar, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which was expected to please some key players: the U.S. pro-Israel lobby, Israel, Egypt and Trump. And please the latter, no doubt, it did. This was MbS’s allotted role.

The *quid pro quo* was: that U.S. and Israel jointly would act to weaken and circumscribe (Saudi’s nemesis) Iran, and that Israel would move *pari passu* with the bin Salman-led incremental normalization with Israel, to somehow improve the Palestinian issue.

The problem was that the parties seem to have held exaggerated expectations of what each, realistically could do. (Some in Israel may have had more grounded expectations, but the notion of some “game-changing” geo-strategic realignment afoot, was plainly evident from the rhetoric of senior Israeli officials at the recent Herzaliyya security conference.)

The ability of the U.S. to “roll back” Iran in Syria, Iraq or Lebanon, seems too, to have been over-estimated by the West Wing, which has become a kind of “alt-State Department.” The West Wing seems to have ignored the new reality of a now geographically interconnected Lebanon-Syria-Iraq-Iran axis, and of the import of military mobilization of the Shi’a now taking place in Iraq. Equally, it seems to have overlooked that there never was Sunni unity in opposing Iran, that there never has been unity of purpose within the GCC, and that there is little appetite amongst Sunni states for some new Saudi hegemony to arise.

Ben Caspit, a senior Israeli correspondent, has written, quoting a senior military official, “there are now those in Israel who confess to the sin of committing a ‘substantial historic mistake’ in its early days by choosing to engage the Shiites in conflict, rather than accepting them and forming an alliance with them.”

“We will come to regret this for generations”, the military official added. “We can only consider changing course once the Iranian Revolution is over ... but no one knows when that will be.”

The ability of Saudi Arabia to move beyond some limited confidence measures (such as in guaranteeing sea passage as a part of the Camp David Accords, over-flights and the establishment of telecommunications with Israel) are plainly very limited indeed – without commensurate and substantive Israeli moves to alleviate the Palestinian plight. Neither Saudi Arabia nor any other Muslim state will accept any outcome that prejudices the position of Jerusalem, in the eyes of the Islamic world.

### **Netanyahu’s Limits**

And that is what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cannot give (without losing his government). He can make almost no concessions to the Palestinians and still keep his coalition intact. He is apt to hint at being able to do more, and perhaps the West Wing took these expressions literally, (they will not have been the first to make this mistake).

Even the weakened Palestinian leadership cannot afford to bend on Jerusalem. Sunni Arab leaders may be fed up with the Palestinian issue, but they understand that to mess with the status of Jerusalem is to touch the electric “rail” that can undo their own legitimacy.

How will this end? It is too early to judge the impact in Saudi Arabia. It may prove to be indeed “game-changing,” but for Israel, the default position will be to continue “managing” and continuing, the present *status quo*, in respect to the Palestinians. The exception to this “more of the same” meme, could be that Israel’s current attempt to form a *cordon sanitaire* around occupied Golan and to push back Syrian forces – especially Iranian partner forces – could end with some sort of military escalation. Israeli officials express concern that once ISIS in Raqqa falls, that the US will do a deal with Russia – and move on – leaving the Syrian government and its “partner forces” sitting on the Golan, on the other side of the Armistice Line – to Israel’s deep chagrin.

Not surprisingly, Israel’s allies are mobilizing to “keep the United States on the right side — i.e., its side — of the conflict.” Already the neocons spy that, with the air going out from the West Wing’s “Great Alliance,” a hole in U.S. foreign policy has opened up – into which Israeli concerns can be inserted.

It is no coincidence that we have Mark Dubowitz calling for full-spectrum, overt and covert, U.S. offensive against Iran in the *Wall Street Journal*, and Ray Takeyh in the *Washington Post* at the same time, insisting that “Its Time to Prepare for Iran’s Political Collapse.” In effect, these commentators are calling on America to resurrect again, its Cold War ethos and instincts.

I wonder if President Trump really has the political will (or desire) to pursue full spectrum, Cold War containment of Iran, as Israel’s allies and MbS are urging. If he tries, he is likely to find it a lonely place – with only Israel and its allies urging America to expend its energies (and possibly its lives), in such way. The Europeans (that is to say France and Germany) have already elected to stand up to America on Iran, when these governments approved the path-finding \$5 billion

*Total* deal with Iran to develop the South Pars gas field. (China and Russia are already Iranian strategic and trade partners.)

It seems rather, that it may be slowly dawning on the U.S. Administration that all this neocon foreign policy advice stove-piped into the West Wing is leaving the U.S. President with nothing to say when he talks to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's pre-G-20 statement on Syria, saying effectively that Syria is in Russia's hands, may reflect a first appreciation of this dilemma.

### **A Weakened Trump**

Trump is in a weakened state (as a result of the Russia brouhaha). Meanwhile, Putin's principal concerns are ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons, NATO expansion, and the strategic balance. To the degree that Trump says anything resembling an understanding of Putin's deep concerns, Trump will unleash the hounds of the Liberal Establishment, baying at him, with the cry, "collaborator" (which is pretty much what happened after the Trump-Putin meeting at the G-20). And ditto for Ukraine (apart from uttering some banalities about the importance of Minsk – though Tillerson can quietly follow up, more substantively, later).

What the Gulf and Israel's allies have done with their agenda of *cordons sanitaire* along Syria's borders, of roll-back of Iran and Hizbullah in Syria, of balkanization of Syria, and of the attempted severance of Iran from Syria (via a Kurdish wedge), is to leave Trump empty-handed. What can Trump offer Putin in the war on ISIS (beyond obstructions to Putin's allies — and to Putin's objective to maintain the infrastructure and territory of the Syrian State, intact), that Putin might welcome, and find useful? Equally, how can Putin assist Trump when the U.S. agenda avoids, like the plague, any and all association with the very forces trying to establish stability in Syria?

Tillerson's statement just might be the first hint that these considerations are being given serious thought (such as the Putin-Trump agreement on a partial cease-fire in southwest Syria). We shall see, soon enough.