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Does Trump Want a New Middle East War?

The president appears to see Saudi Arabia as a vital part of his ill-conceived anti-Iran jihad

By Bob Dreyfuss

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Does Donald Trump want a new Middle East war, pitting Saudi Arabia against Iran in a conflict that could lay waste to the world's oil region and drag the United States into a conflict that would make the war in Iraq look like a minor skirmish? It sure looks like it.

In his September address to the United Nations, Trump took aim at the six-power accord that froze Iran's nuclear program, calling it "one-sided" and "an embarrassment to the United States" and lambasting Iran, in typically over-the-top Trumpian rhetoric, as a "rogue state whose chief exports are violence, bloodshed and chaos." A few weeks later, Trump unilaterally decertified the deal, threatening to kill it once and for all. Now, Saudi Arabia – Iran's foremost regional adversary – has upped the ante, with a series of actions that have dramatically raised area tensions. And the Saudis, who run the world's leading dictatorship, are doing it with the full encouragement of the White House.

Over the weekend, Saudi Arabia threatened military conflict with Iran following a missile strike into the country from neighboring Yemen, where for the past several years the Saudis have been engaged in a brutal war against tribal forces allegedly aligned with Iran. Referring to the missile attack, the Saudi foreign minister – who used to be Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States – said, "We see this as an act of war. Iran cannot lob missiles at Saudi cities and towns and

expect us not to take steps." Yet Iran has no troops in Yemen, and Tehran provides only modest support to the so-called Houthi forces there, making it highly unlikely that the missile was Iranian-sent. And four days before the missile was launched – it was shot down, causing no damage – the American-supplied, Saudi-led military coalition bombed a market in Yemen, killing at least 26. Since the civil war began in 2015, Yemen has suffered under a reckless bombing campaign by Saudi Arabia's air force that has caused thousands of civilian casualties.

On the same day, November 4th, Saad Hariri, the Saudi-backed prime minister of Lebanon, flew into Riyadh, the Saudi capital, to announce he was resigning his post. Hariri coupled his resignation with a bitter attack on Iran and on Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, which exercises significant power inside the tiny country. Until Hariri's move, which was widely seen as something done at Saudi Arabia's bidding, Lebanon had spent the past two years with its politics carefully weighted between Sunni, pro-Saudi forces and Shiite, pro-Iran forces. His resignation could conceivably plunge Lebanon into the kind of civil war that has already devastated both Yemen and Syria, Lebanon's next-door neighbor. In the Seventies and Eighties, Lebanon was racked by a civil war that left tens of thousands dead, but since then it has existed in a fragile balance.

Finally, and also on the night of November 4th, an unprecedented crisis erupted in Saudi Arabia. In what's been described as a Saudi-style "night of the long knives," King Salman of Saudi Arabia and his son, Mohammed bin Salman without warning launched a stunning purge of dozens of princes, elite businessmen and military commanders. Among those arrested – many of whom were reportedly held in a makeshift "prison" at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Riyadh – were Alwaleed bin Talal, perhaps the richest billionaire in Saudi Arabia, and Mitab bin Abdullah, the son of the last Saudi king and the commander of Saudi Arabia's powerful National Guard. The sweeping wave of arrests stunned the country, signaling an iron-fist effort by Mohammed bin Salman (known by his initials, MBS) to consolidate virtually all power in the oil-rich kingdom under his control.

Until the coup by MBS, for decades Saudi Arabia has existed as a harsh and unforgiving monarchy that governed by consensus among various factions of the enormous ruling family's many subgroups and clans. Now, for the first time in the country's history, virtually the entire regime, including its three military branches, has fallen under the dominance of one small part of the family, the Salmans. And since the aged king cleared the decks for his youthful son to succeed him, MBS has engineered a new Saudi foreign policy, including a rapid escalation of the war in Yemen and a much more aggressive attitude toward Iran.

Though the threats against Iran, the renewed Lebanon crisis and the Saudi political purge triggered worldwide alarm, President Trump lost no time endorsing the actions by King Salman and MBS. "I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing," Trump tweeted from a stop on his Asia trip. Rather than question the extrajudicial arrests and detentions, which were made without any charges being filed and without any details being released about the number and identities of those swept up, Trump endorsed the purge, too. "Some of those they are harshly treating have been 'milking' their country for years," he tweeted.

Indeed, it's reasonable to suspect the Trump administration had a direct hand in Saudi Arabia's newfound muscular policies. Just a few days before all of this unfolded, Jared Kushner – Trump's son-in-law, who's been given a vast portfolio for Middle East policy – made an unannounced and still unexplained visit to Saudi Arabia, where he powwowed with Mohammed bin Salman. Kushner, 36, and MBS, 32, reportedly spent long hours, just the two of them, deep in conversation. "MBS is emboldened by strong support from President Trump and his inner circle, who see him as a kindred disrupter of the status quo — at once a wealthy tycoon and a populist insurgent," wrote David Ignatius in *The Washington Post*. "It was probably no accident that last month, Jared Kushner ... made a personal visit to Riyadh. The two princes are said to have stayed up until nearly 4 a.m. several nights, swapping stories and planning strategy."

You'll recall that last May, Trump made a lavish state visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met with leaders of the kingdom and its allies, including Egypt's military dictator and the oil potentates who control the United Arab Emirates. During that visit, his first foreign trip as president, Trump cemented a close working relationship with Saudi Arabia, its king and MBS. (It was during that visit that an eerie photograph was taken of the president, the Saudi king and the Egyptian general with their hands all touching a glowing orb.) It was immediately after that visit that Saudi Arabia launched an all-out campaign of intimidation and an economic embargo against tiny Qatar, a nearly oil sheikhdom that, the Saudis charged, was leaning too close to Iran. Trump endorsed the anti-Qatar outburst from Saudi Arabia, too.

It seems clear beyond any doubt that Trump, who has a penchant for foreign dictators and authoritarian rulers – see Russia's Putin, China's Xi, Turkey's Erdogan and the Philippines' Duterte – sees Saudi Arabia as a vital part of his ill-conceived anti-Iran jihad. Perhaps Trump and Kushner, neither of whom have the slightest experience in world affairs, believe that by buddying up with the Saudis they can put pressure on Iran to reign in its actions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan. But it's a risky strategy, since Iran is certain not to accede to Saudi threats and bluster, and it's very possible the two Persian Gulf powers could find themselves quickly entangled in a regional war that would draw the United States in on Saudi Arabia's side.

Meanwhile, when both Trump and Saudi Arabia are involved, it ought to be taken for granted that there's lots of cash at stake. In this case, however, the amounts are staggering. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Salmans are poised to seize as much as \$800 billion in cash from the accounts of those being arrested under MBS' crackdown, many of whom are likely to be charged with corruption. (In Saudi Arabia, princely corruption is not unusual; it's how the system works.) On top of that, sometime in 2018 Saudi Arabia will offer worldwide investors the chance to bid on an initial public offering for its gigantic, government-owned oil company, Aramco. When they do, it will be the largest IPO in world history, with a value of \$2 trillion. And President Trump is paying attention, shamelessly urging Saudi Arabia to list the offering on the New York stock exchanges.

"I want them to strongly consider the New York Stock Exchange or Nasdaq," said Trump, speaking on November 4th – yes, the same day as the Saudi crackdown and other events of that day – from an air force base in Japan. "I just spoke to the king a little while ago, and they will consider it." To make sure everyone got the point, that day Trump also tweeted about it. "Important to the United States!" he wrote.

