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**TRUMP: DANCING WITH THE SAUDIS**

Last week, for a brief moment, broadcast media took pleasure in reporting on President Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia. We were treated to images of glistening gilded palaces as Trump and his associates awkwardly and amusingly attempted the *ardah* — the traditional Saudi “sword dance.” Expectations for the president’s overseas premiere were low as evidenced by a New York Times op-ed (5/26/17) that described the trip as a “non-disaster.”

Given the many derogatory remarks *candidate* Trump made about Islam and Muslims in general during the presidential campaign, I think we were all perhaps a little surprised that the president eschewed the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric in his speech, so avidly embraced before, and instead spoke of “shared interests and values.” Many observers rightly remind us of the wave of Islamophobia that Trump’s campaign unleashed and countenanced among his advocates and advisors.¹ Does he now truly believe that Islam is “one of the world’s great faiths” or does he continue to believe “Islam hates us,” as he said to Anderson Cooper in March 2016?

But let’s face it: Trump was not invited to an international gathering in Saudi Arabia to discuss religion per se. He was there to announce a *business* deal, neatly wrapped up in remarks about combating terrorism and extremism. Referring to perpetrators of violence, five times he repeated: “DRIVE THEM OUT!” Not once, however, did he address the root causes of radicalization and terrorism, particularly those to be found in the authoritarian, corrupt, ineffective, and oppressive regimes with whom he now danced. The president’s primary purpose was to announce the $110 *billion* arms sale that he had just concluded with the Saudis to “help the Saudi military to take a greater role in security operations” – and give American defense contractors a boost.

Many in the media quickly shook the dust of the Obama administration from their feet and lauded Trump’s savvy “reset” with the Saudis. Pundits had conveniently forgotten that Obama had blocked a much smaller arms sale to the Saudis in December 2016 – and for a very good reason: the mounting number of civilian casualties in Yemen’s civil war, casualties caused by Saudi-coalition airstrikes *using American-supplied weapons*. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon had condemned the Saudi attacks that “have already caused immense carnage, and destroyed much of the country’s medical facilities and other vital civilian infrastructure.” But none of this seems to have concerned Mr. Trump and his friends as they reveled in Riyadh.

We were also perhaps surprised to hear that Mr. Trump has finally come to the realization that the vast majority of people who suffer the effects of terrorism and extremism are Muslims. With all his cavorting with Sunni shaykhs, however, he neglected to note that the majority of Muslim victims are Shi’ite. ISIS came into existence with the express purpose of eradicating Shi’ites who were seen as collaborators with the Americans in Iraq. In its “breakout” year of 2014, ISIS killed as many as 10,000 Shi’ites alone. While Trump praised Bahrain for “working to undermine recruitment and radicalism,” he neglected to mention that the Bahraini royal family has vigorously suppressed Shi’ite demands for greater rights and freedoms. Just two days after Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Bahraini police arrested 286 Shi’ite protestors who were facilely labeled “terrorists.”
Instead of challenging Gulf States to end the oppression of and violence against the Shi’a in the Middle East and South Asia, he chose to completely enter the sectarian divide on the side of the Wahhabi Sunnis of the Gulf by taking particular aim against Shi’ite 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.”

When President Trump and Secretary Tillerson speak of Iran’s support of “terrorism,” they actually mean Iran’s opposition to American-Saudi and American-Israeli hegemony in the region, be it political, military, economic or religious. Both the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars have largely developed into proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia, supported by Russia and the United States, respectively. As far as actual terrorism is concerned, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has repeatedly denounced violence committed in the name of Islam, as has the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif. Most recently, Iran’s Foreign Ministry condemned the Manchester bombing and the murder of Coptic Christians in Egypt. To continue to disparage the Iranians is not only unjust it is also unwise and counterproductive.

What Mr. Trump neglected to say in Riyadh is that Iran is perhaps the single greatest opponent of ISIS in the Middle East due to the group’s brutality against Shi’ite Muslims. If indeed, Mr. Trump wants to defeat ISIS, he should end the incessant verbal attacks on Iran and engage them as a partner in the fight against Sunni extremism. But neither the Saudis nor Israelis want that to happen, and do everything they can to keep the U.S. at odds with Iran.

Also to the delight of the Gulf States and the Israelis, President Trump took aim at Hezbollah, the Shi’ite military and political organization that came into existence in Lebanon to resist Israeli expansionism as well as American intervention in the region. Simplistically and incorrectly, he simply tossed Hezbollah into the same basket with ISIS and al-Qaeda, failing to mention that, like Iran, Hezbollah has focused its attention on defeating ISIS in Syria. By directing his most vociferous attacks against Iran and Hezbollah, Mr. Trump in essence has given ISIS and the Gulf States his approval for their persecution and murder of Shi’ites in Iraq, Syria, the Gulf, Pakistan, etc.

Rather than concluding a business transaction with the Saudis for weaponry – a deal that has serious humanitarian implications – Mr. Trump might have engaged in true diplomacy by helping to bring the Saudis and the Iranians together to end sectarian conflict in the region, rather than exacerbating it. While the president’s visit to Riyadh may not have been a “disaster,” it was certainly a serious misstep.

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1 See: Jordan Denari Duffner’s “After Trump’s Saudi Speech” (http://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/05/24/after-trumps-saudi-speech-dont-...