

The Unholy Alliance Between the Most Democratic and the Most Autocratic

Washington and Riyadh: Should we be worried?

By Dawit Giorgis

Alexis de Tocqueville a French diplomat and author of ‘Democracy in America’ wrote in 1831: “America is great because she is good.... If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.... Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.” And he warned, “Society is endangered not by the great profligacy of a few, but by the laxity of morals amongst all.”²

Lincoln described America in 1862 as “the last best hope of earth.” Is the earth losing this hope? Is America facing a crisis of values? Is it becoming consumed with selfishness and greed, loathed by many, isolated and becoming its own worst enemy?

This past two weeks we have been overwhelmed with news coming out of Turkey, Istanbul. The news is about one man but very indicative of how rule of law and human rights are no more the fundamental tenets of the US foreign policy. The alliance of the most democratic with the most autocratic in the world is becoming a deadly combination to those without power or money.

The disappearance of Washington Post journalist, Jamal Khashoggi has once again tested the core value of American foreign policy. Mr. Khashoggi, a Saudi citizen and a resident of the USA, was seen entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, but was not seen coming out. Turkey’s officials believe that Saudi assassins have murdered him inside the consulate. As I write this, the evidence of the killing of Khashoggi in the consulate is overwhelming. The world is abuzz with the possibility of America imposing sanctions on Saudi Arabia, if it is confirmed that Khashoggi was murdered and cut to pieces according to the statements of Turkish officials, in the Saudi consular office in Istanbul. President Trump says he will take serious steps if it is true that the journalist has been murdered. But an official source from Saudi Arabia vows to retaliate if the US uses sanctions. “ The kingdom affirms its total rejection of any threats to impose economic sanctions or

¹ Dawit Giorgis: www.africaiss.org

² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whats-wrong-with-making-america-great-again_us_58db055ae4b07f61a2bb89a0

the use of political pressure. The kingdom also affirms that it will respond to any action with a bigger one.” The showdown has begun.

Analysts believe America is just posturing. President Trump’s accusation of Saudi Arabia has been many. In 2012, Trump falsely accused Saudi Arabia of conspiring with Obama to lower gas prices and making illegal campaign contributions. More recently, he argued that Saudis, “want women as slaves and to kill gays..... insisted over and over again that he wanted to change U.S. policy so that Saudi Arabia pays us more for national security aid.” During his visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017, all of these arguments evaporated. Trump hailed Saudi Arabia’s achievements, backed away from his previous positions, and vowed to “help our Saudi friends to get a good deal from our great American defense companies.”

Saudi Arabia will almost certainly come out of this unscathed and pay its way out of this blatant crime as it has done on numerous occasions. As the alliances in the Middle East shift in a dramatic way, bringing Israel and Saudi Arabia on one side, Iran, Russia and Syria on the other, America needs Saudi Arabia not only for reasons of oil and other economic interests but for strategic reasons as well. Saudi Arabia knows this. When the USA lost its ally Iran, it shifted to Saudi Arabia pitting the Sunni Islam to Shia theocracy in Iran.

The U.S. opposition to Iran is not about human rights or its authoritarian rule. Saudi Arabia is more authoritarian than Iran and is the leading human rights violator in the world. Iran conducts free and fair elections. It is not also because Iran supports militant groups in Syria, in Iraq and other places. Saudi Arabia does that better and extensively. Iranians are nationalists, proud and independent people who refuse to bow down to the USA and Iran is perceived to be a threat to Israel because of its constant rhetoric directed at Israel.

“WikiLeaks cables portray Saudi Arabia as a cash machine for terrorists.....Saudi Arabia is the world's largest source of funds for Islamist militant groups. Hilary Clinton wrote in a secret memo, Dec 2009,” “More needs to be done since Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaida, the Taliban and other terrorist groups,” Her memo urged US diplomats to redouble their efforts to stop Gulf money reaching extremists in Pakistan and Afghanistan.....Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide,”³

The Council of Foreign Relations writes in 2014 “ Al Qaeda, the ISIS in Iraq, Boko Haram, the Shahbab and others are all violent Sunni Salafi groupings: For five decades. Saudi Arabia has been the official sponsor...” No crimes against humanity, no direct and indirect association with terrorists has changed the relationship between these two countries. The ties that bind the

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development>

two countries are deep and long. Not even the fact that the 15 of the 19 terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center were Saudis, made America change its policy toward Saudi Arabia.

For two centuries America has promoted the values of liberalism, democracy human rights, equality rule of law and justice globally. Though there have been constant debate between the right and the left, it has generally been agreed that spreading and protecting these values were one of the fundamental tenets of US foreign policy. In recent years the US has been distancing itself from its global responsibility as the only superpower. It is feared that American isolationist policy will change the character of the international system and perhaps introduce a disorderly world. Isolationism will diminish the greatness of America. America will lose respect and the purpose and use of its global power. America will be seen as hypocrite because it does not live to the values it espouses. Anne –Marie Slaughter wrote in an opinion piece on New York Times in 2007:

“ American foreign policy has lost its compass... Above all, a value-based foreign policy must move beyond rhetoric. It must meet the challenges of the 21st century in a host of very specific ways that themselves demonstrate how much we value liberty, democracy, justice, equality, tolerance, humility and faith.” ⁴

Since she wrote this piece, the US foreign policy has not changed much, though the rhetoric and the sound bites from Obama gave a perception of American continued interest in promoting these values. In 2017 ten years later, President Trump is seen retreating not only from the core values that form the basis of US foreign policy but also from the world order established after world war II. Brookings Institute had this to say:

“ Trump has scorned the idea of the United States as a haven for those fleeing persecution, perhaps America’s longest legacy. He has highlighted and exacerbated intolerance, complaining about people from” shithole countries” to building a wall to deal with a nonexistent surge in migration from Mexico and playing up anti-Muslim sentiment . The Trump administration is even separating children from their families at the border. This ugly side of America preceded Trump and will endure after he leaves office, but in the past, U.S. leaders have downplayed, not exacerbated, these sentiments. Trump’s words and actions seem to confirm what some anti-American voices have long claimed: that the United States is racist and intolerant. It will be a long road back to the high ground, but our true values are still the best compass.” ⁵

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/17/opinion/17iht-edslaughter.1.5753422.html>

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/18/recovering-from-the-trump-foreign-policy/>

Today as the Jamal Khashoggi disappearance unravels, the world witnesses the latest and most glaring example of the hypocrisy of American foreign policy. The United States has been in the forefront of the promotion of freedom, democracy and human rights in China, Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela and others in Asia, Africa and Latin America. People have always wondered why so many governments condemn the excesses and abuses of many African governments and yet remain silent in the face of a well-documented reports of human rights violations routinely emerging from Saudi Arabia through the United Nations and other Human Rights organizations ?

In 1933 the country we know today, as Saudi Arabia overflowing with oil and with over 1500 princes and princesses with incredible wealth, was just a new state and a patch of desert fought over by tribes and a religious zealot Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab, a theologian and founder of the Wahabi movement, a return to the "true" principles of Islam. The practice of slavery in Saudi Arabia was rampant then. The Saud family, Abdul al-Aziz Ibn Saud, and Abdul al-Wahab emerged victorious in the end and entered into a pact to create Saudi Arabia. They conquered the holy cities of Islam Mecca and Medina and al Saud was declared king of a new country named after him with ibn Abd al-Wahhab in charge of religious affairs.

The United States was not at all interested in this new state in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula and did not recognize it as a state initially. During those years the kingdom's income depended mostly on the revenue from the pilgrimages of Muslims to Mecca. Standard Oil of California (SoCal) discovered oil in Bahrain in 1932. SoCal got the exclusive right to explore in Saudi Arabia. SoCal created a subsidiary, the California Arabian Subsidiary Standard Oil Company (Cosac) to handle the Saudi operations. In 1936 Texas company Texaco bought half the subsidiary. The two companies renamed the company ARAMCO. Thus the traditional autocracy of Arab Bedouins and the American capitalism flourished. Oil was discovered in 1938. ARAMCO secured more areas to explore by giving direct loans to the Saudi family. American recognition of Saudi Arabia did not come until 1938 when SoCal obtained the petroleum concession. But there it was not on an ambassadorial level. It was the American ambassador in Egypt that was occasionally visiting the kingdom. The Saudis were also reluctant to admit Americans to their country because they believed they will try to liberate their Saudi slaves from Africa.

As America's involvement in the Saudi oil industry increased, it promised the Saudi that it would not interfere with this long-standing practice of slavery. America was prepared to accept slavery in Saudi Arabia 100 years after slavery was abolished in the USA. Saudi Arabia abolished official slavery only in 1962. "Kennedy was the only president who made this an Issue and because of his insistent King Faisal issued a proclamation outlawing slavery.

No other president before or since would take such a principled position against Saudi human rights abuses.”⁶

Despite this proclamation just a decade ago, a member of Saudi Arabia’s highest religious body was caught on tape preaching that “slavery is a part of Islam”. He elaborated that “slavery is a part of jihad, and jihad will remain as long as there is Islam”. There are approximately eleven million foreign laborers of which two million are maids mostly from Asia and Africa. The inhumane treatment they continue to face has been recorded by many humanitarian organizations. This is Saudi Arabia’s modern day slavery.⁷

The Saudi led coalition has waged war on Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the world. The bombardment of Yemen by Saudi led Gulf Alliance every day has caused the death of over 10,000 civilians and the destruction of a country. These are people who are being killed by American made weapons. “The latest heartbreak involved the shocking news that American made weapons were used in an airstrike that killed dozens of children on a school bus coming back from picnic, UN investigators reported that all parties in Yemen bloody conflict have committed war crimes adding that Saudi led coalition airstrikes had caused most of the documented civilian casualties”⁸

In his speech to the UN general assembly last September, President Trump avoided criticizing Saudi Arabia for its crimes against humanity in Yemen. Instead he criticized Iran the rival of Saudi Arabia in the region and praised Saudi Arabia and the Emirates for pledging billions in aid and “pursuing multiple avenues to ending Yemen’s horrible, horrific civil war” he failed to mention the role US plays and that the current conflict came to this level when Saudi Arabia led a coalition of Arab countries to intervene in the war.⁹

The US, though it is not involved directly, is making the situation worse by siding with the Saudi coalition and supplying arms. In one incident more than a hundred and forty mourners were killed and five hundred were wounded in the strike. On Jan 2018 the New Yorker in an article entitled “How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse, by Nicolas Nicharcos, had this to say regarding this incident:

“Yemeni investigators unearthed a tail fin of one of the bombs. The serial number indicates that Raytheon, the third-largest defense company in the United States, produced the bomb, a Mark-82—a sleek steel case eighty-seven inches long, twelve inches in diameter, and filled with five hundred

⁶ [Bard The Arab Lobby](#)

⁷ <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/saudi-arabia-doubles-down-abuse-9448>

⁸ [The guardian Sept. 3, 2018.](#)

⁹ [The Atlantic Sept 30 2018](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/iran-yemen-saudi-arabia/571465/>

pounds of explosive—. The bomb had been modified with a laser guidance system, made in factories in Arizona and Texas, called a Paveway-II. The weapons are sometimes referred to as “dumb bombs with graduate degrees.” “They had been sold to the Saudis on the understanding that they would make their targeting more accurate,” Mark Hiznay, the associate arms director at Human Rights Watch, said. “It turned out that the Saudis were failing to take all the feasible precautions in attacks that were killing civilians accurately.” On June 15 the Saudi alliance launched a big offensive on the port city of Hodeida. The Saudi strategy seems to be a starvation siege on all territory held by the Houthis and their aligned forces. There are some eighteen million people living in those territories. Eight million of them are already on the border of starvation. The Saudis want to take Hodeida block food access for the people in Sanaa. If they succeed, or if fighting damages the harbor infrastructure, the eight million will probably die.

Arab warplanes and warships pounded Houthi positions in Yemen's Hodeida as the Saudi-led alliance tried to seize the port city in the largest battle of a war that has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The US Apache helicopters bombed targets within the port and hundreds of thousands fled from the area. Arab News reports liberating Hodeida is a must for cutting the Houthi lifeline. Asharq al-Awsat, an Arabic international newspaper headquartered in London, wrote that the operations is necessary to “tighten the siege” until the Houthi “surrender to all conditions and resolutions”, “hand over their arms” and “leave Sanaa” As of June 17 the situation was dire with independent sources reporting that the battle for control of the main gateway for food shipments has already claimed at least 280 lives and it is feared protracted fighting will leave millions at risk of starvation. Even before the war, the Arab world’s poorest nation struggled to feed itself. It is a country of deserts and mountains with dwindling water resources where only 2 to 4 percent of the land is cultivated, so almost all of its food and supplies must be imported. The war has shattered everything that kept Yemen just above starvation. Coalition warplanes blasted hospitals, schools, farms, factories, bridges and roads. The United Nations attempted to get a negotiated settlement. But after two months of efforts it was clear that it was not going anywhere. The Guardian reports on Sept 11: “it appears that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have concluded that the UN diplomatic track has been exhausted.”¹⁰

The humanitarian situation has worsened rapidly since UN peace talks collapsed and fighting resumed in the port city of Hodeida, where hundreds of thousands of lives hang in the balance, the top UN aid official in the country has said. In the middle of September the UN warned of an “incalculable human cost” in Yemen, potentially affecting hundreds of thousands of people,

¹⁰ [The guardian.com/world/2018/sep/11/saudi-led-forces-renew-push-to-take-key-yemen-port-from-houthi-rebels](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/11/saudi-led-forces-renew-push-to-take-key-yemen-port-from-houthi-rebels)

as an Arab force backed by the United States pressed once again towards the port of Hodeida".¹¹

"Yet months after a serious congressional effort to stop the U.S. intervention, Mike Pompeo, US secretary of state, is pushing to continue America's involvement, even as bureaucrats in the State Department—the sorts of people Trump supporters denigrate as the "deep state"—are urging an end to U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia."¹²

One of the most powerful lobbyist in Washington DC is the Arab Lobby. Mitchell Bard writes extensively about the "the dark side of the massive and largely undemocratic Arab lobbying efforts to influence American policy with regard to the Middle East".¹³ The Arab Lobby, led by Saudi Arabia, is clearly different from the other most powerful lobby, the Israeli Lobby. The Israel lobby is based on popular support from the population.

"Arab lobby has almost no foot soldiers or public sympathy." He further informs us that the Arab Lobby's most powerful tools are paid bureaucrats representing their "personal opinions" or what they consider to be "institutional interests", and foreign governments promoting their own agenda, rather than those of the United States. "What they lack in human capital in terms of American advocates, they make up for with almost unlimited resources to try to buy what they usually cannot win on the merits of their arguments,"¹⁴

Due to this lack of support, according to Bard, "The Saudis have taken a different tact from the Israeli lobby, focusing a top-down rather than bottom-up approach to lobbying. As hired gun, J. Crawford Cook, wrote in laying out his proposed strategy for the kingdom, 'Saudi Arabia has a need to influence the few that influence the many, rather than the need to influence the many to whom the few must respond.... About half of retiring senators and a third of retiring House members register as lobbyists. That's up from less than 5 percent in the 1970s.'"¹⁵

Of the nearly four dozen lawmakers who left office after the 2016 election, one-fourth stayed in Washington, and one in six became lobbyists, according to an analysis by *The Atlantic*. The numbers were even higher for those who

¹¹ <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/as-us-backed-forces-renew-yemen-offensive-un-warns-of-incalculable-human-cost-1.547430>

¹² <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/trumps-dirty-war-in-yemen/570940/>

¹³ Alan M Dershowitz, author, Professor and Attorney

¹⁴ M. Bard, *The Arab Lobby*

¹⁵ <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/15/10775788/revolving-door-lobbying>

departed after the 2014 midterms: About half of those former members stuck around, and around one in four became lobbyists. ¹⁶

Saudi Arabia has directed billions of dollars to powerful influential Americans and corporate partners to win support from congress and administration. There are several Americans working in Saudi Arabia lobbying and PR firms. Many influential American think tanks have accepted funds from Saudi Arabia and expected to promote ideas that are consistent with Saudi policies. The lobbyists of the arms industry are aggressive effective. The Saudis have been employing high profile Americans including former lawmakers. Saudi Arabia has mobilized its army of lobbyists and many other paid friends. The president has already said Khsahoggi's fate should not disturb the 110 billion dollar sales of weapons agreed between him the Saudi crown prince.

“Saudi foreign agents are working tirelessly to shape perceptions of that country, its royals, its policies, and especially its grim war in Yemen, while simultaneously working to keep US weapons and military support flowing into the Kingdom.” ¹⁷

Trump has embraced Saudi Arabia's new leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and on a trip to the country early in his administration, he signed a deal for \$110 billion in arms sales to the kingdom.

"I think that would be hurting us," Trump told Fox News. "We have jobs, we have a lot of things happening in this country. We have a country that's doing probably better economically than it's ever done before." This was said after the Kshaoggi was on the news.

This was on the 10th October. On the 15th Trump said apparently after talking to King Of Saudi Arabia, “ raised the prospect that “rogue killers” are responsible for whatever happened to Khsaoggi.” On the 16th of October, in the face of mounting evidence the media reported that Saudis were prepared to admit that it was an interrogation that went wrong and caused the death of Kshaoggi . But there was not a single media outlet that supported this version except Donald Trump. On the 17th Trump jumps to the defense of Saudi Arabia and said, according to Associate Press; “Here we go again with you're guilty until proven innocent,” amidst tons of evidence that Kshaoggi was murdered by assassins who came with two special Saudi planes. Several congressmen and senators have already vowed to take actions against Saudi Arabia. Amongst the team of assassins there were forensic expert and members of the crown prince's security guard.”

¹⁶<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/lobbying-the-job-of-choice-for-retired-members-of-congress/558851/>

¹⁷ <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/15/10775788/revolving-door-lobbying>

Trump stated same day that he as no financial interests in Saudi Arabia. It was of course wrong. He has a long list of his business connections with Saudi Arabia. According to the CNN, Trump had previously stated that he was doing business with Saudi Arabia. Starting in the 1990s a prince got Trump out of a crisis by buying his yacht another time by buying the Plaza Hotel across the United Nations in New York for 325 million dollars. In 2000 the Saudi Government bought an entire floor at the Trump Plaza. Most recently there has been a remarkable increase of revenues from his hotels in Washington DC and in Chicago used by Saudi lobbyists and businessmen according to CNN. Trump is enmeshed with the Saudis more than any other American president.

Saudi Arabia is Americas number one weapons customer. The U.S. remains the world's largest weapons exporter, a position it has held since the late 1990s. According to CBS news of October 12, The U.S. sold a total of \$55.6 billion of weapons worldwide in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 — up 33 percent from the previous fiscal year, and a near record. In 2017, the U.S. cleared some \$18 billion in new Saudi arms deals. Over the five years ending in 2017, nearly one-fifth of American weapons exports went to Saudi Arabia, SIPRI reports. Overall, half went to the Middle East and North Africa. In the 2017 calendar year alone, the U.S cleared some \$18 billion in new Saudi arms deals.

Saudi Arabia's multi billion-dollar investment is all over the USA. A 10 billion dollar Petro chemical plan in Corpus Christi Texas, a 7 billion dollar investment by ROWAN companies, 6 billion dollars by National Oilwell and Aramco for advanced drilling machines and many more. Nearly half of US arms exports go to the Middle East with Saudi Arabia as the world's second biggest importer. Based on a deal signed during the Obama years, "and further major contracts signed in 2017, will ensure that the USA remains the largest arms exporter in the coming years...The UK which rolled out a red carpet for the Saudi crown prince on his visit to London ...exported nearly half of its arms to the Saudi Arabia which has increased its imports by 225%." ¹⁸

The tie that binds US and Europe, the most democratic countries in the world, with the most repressive government in the world is greed. We can be certain now that the posturing of the USA, Turkey and Europe on this blatant crime in front of the whole world is being transformed to negotiations that will allow Saudi Arabia to get out of this crisis with impunity. What is at stake for Europe and America is much greater than the life of Mr. Kshaoggi. It puts the rights of freedom of expression by the poor who dare to speak the truth about Saudi Arabia at greater risk. And the killings of innocent Yemenis by arms and diplomatic support that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are getting from the USA and the United Kingdom goes on unabated. What a brutal world we live in? People are being sold and killed, countries destroyed to satisfy the greed of the powers to be. The Saudi US alliance is becoming an axis of evil.

Trump's secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, made it clear in his first substantive speech to State Department employees that American values are now of at best secondary importance to "American interests," presumably economic, in the conduct of foreign policy. As isolationism the fundamental tenets of America's foreign policy human rights, rule of law justice democracy and individual freedom has been completely blindsided. ¹⁹

From all what we see and read Trump has little concern to human rights, democracy justice, freedom and rule of law in the rest of the world except when it promotes the immediate economic or security needs of the US. Human rights are seen more as an instrument for short-term goals rather than values that need to be protected, promoted and defended wherever they are at risk. The US has withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council. The administration has pulled back from its active promotion of human rights across the globe. America is not leading and it is not leaving it there. It is encouraging countries like Saudi Arabia and other rogue nations with a dismal record for human rights and rule of law, do whatever they want to do in the region and beyond, as long as what they do, advances, protects American interests.

Already Arab countries have not been able to condemn or comment on the Kshaoggi case. They are mum. Saudi Arabia has silenced every state in the Gulf Alliance. It will demand it on this and other matters from all those who have done business with or taken money from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. That will be the beginning. If America can be blackmailed African countries will be, with lesser effort and with a lot of options. The consequences of condemning Saudi Arabia or undermining its interests will be very serious. The Horn is a primary target for the expansion of Saudi and UAE influence in Africa as seen in the flurry of activities of recent years. Yemen is the bridge.

"Ethiopia and Eritrea didn't pen their peace agreement in Addis Ababa, or Asmara, but in Saudi Arabia with the Emirates alongside. Are economic and military interests increasingly binding Gulf states and the Horn together?" asks the Gulf News. Should we be worried? ²⁰

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¹⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/is-trump-ending-the-american-era/537888>

²⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/arab-gulf-states-in-the-horn-of-africa-what-role-do-they-play/a-45602930>