

Iran's Act of War

The Saudis are far from admirable, but we need to support them in this escalating conflict.

by Conrad Black



The drone raid on the Saudi oil fields, along with the Israeli elections, opens a new chapter in Middle Eastern relations. Whether the attack on Saudi oil production, which has temporarily stopped more than half of it, was launched by Iranian-sponsored Yemeni Houthis or by the Iranians themselves is beside the point, as the Houthis had no independent ability whatever to acquire and use such weapons. The Iranians are behind the incident. There is room for legitimate debate about the merits of the conflicting sides in the Yemen war, but there can be no doubt that by any standards, the direct attack on Saudi Arabia was an act of war, and as it was entirely dependent on Iranian weapons procurement and instruction, it is an escalation of the war-by-proxy between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen with an outright act of war by Iran against Saudi Arabia. There is no reason to believe, or even to recommend, that Saudi Arabia should turn the other cheek and

engage in reactive pacifism. Because the Trump administration has ignored the efforts of American political factions, including recalcitrant Republicans, to ditch the Saudis, Washington retains great influence on the Saudi response to what is a severe provocation. This can be seen as a great opportunity, as it furnishes a justification for administering a heavy blow against the most troublesome regime in the world.

The United States would do well to take the trouble to line up allies. The Western alliance will be even more skittish than usual, given that the aggrieved party is the not entirely presentable Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia has been a joint venture between the House of Saud, an old nomadic desert family favored by Britain and France on the collapse of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire at the end of World War I, and the Wahhabi Islamic leadership. The feudal and absolute monarchy paid extensive Danegeld to the Wahhabis as they spread militant Islam throughout the Eurasian landmass and in Australasia and North Africa, in exchange for a free pass for the Saudi royal family. The Saudi regime has gradually, under steady American influence, modernized the structure of the state, spread the petro-money around the population, and withdrawn from the Faustian bargain with fundamentalist Islam. It has followed the Arab version of the Chinese model: economic and (to some extent) social reform and general distribution of prosperity, without relaxing the authority or capacity of self-assertion of the state. The Saudis avoided the catastrophe of Russia and, briefly, Egypt, of trying to introduce democracy without elevating public standards of prosperity and education.

Saudi Arabia is, in any case, a much more reputable regime than the terrorism-promoting, bigoted theocracy of Iran – an almost friendless nation apart from a few other militant Islamic entities and as a nuisance of convenience that China and Russia and even Turkey encourage to irritate the United States and its Middle Eastern allies and protégés, especially

Egypt, the Emirates, the Saudis, and Israel. The struggle that is now escalating is among theocratic and secular Muslim countries, militant Islam, and Middle Eastern minorities – the Jewish state and Arab Christians – and the fairly arcane but often fiercely contested distinction between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, as well as a contest between petroleum-exporting countries, a field where Saudi Arabia has generally been preeminent. These waters have been muddied considerably by the effective elimination by the United States of overseas energy imports as its own production has been sharply boosted from shale-fracking and increased offshore exploration. An incidental but useful clarification from this event has been the revelation of the absurdity and irrelevance of the extreme Green nonsense. The president was correct in announcing that he would release oil as necessary from the U.S. national petroleum reserves to stabilize world supply. Even 50 years from now, no part of the solution to such a problem as this will have anything to do with nostrums about windmills and solar panels.

Apart from the removal of the United States as the world's chief petroleum importer, the Middle Eastern correlation of forces has also been altered by the disintegration of two prominent Arab countries, Iraq and Syria (formerly two of Israel's most militant enemies), and the encroachment upon Arab affairs of the ancient foes of the Arabs, the Turks and the Persians (Iran). The European rejection of Turkey has helped persuade that country's strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to imagine that Turkey has a role to play in Arab affairs, and the general clerical and nationalist belligerency of the Islamic Republic in Iran has assisted the Arabs in focusing on self-protection and shelving their diversionary preoccupation with Israel.

The fixation on Israel was always just an invented distraction of the Arab masses from the misgovernment their leaders inflicted on them, but now, and with Turkey and Iran meddling

in Syria and Iraq, the Palestinians, who were generally regarded in the Arab world as sharpers like the Jews and Lebanese, are redundant to the pan-Arab interest, and Israel is a vital ally. Now is the time for the imposition of a solution: The Palestinians can have a modest state, but that's all they get, and it must be conditioned on formal recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state with internationally agreed frontiers. The Israeli election will almost certainly produce a grand coalition between the two main parties that could facilitate an agreement by producing a slightly more flexible government in Jerusalem, i.e. a somewhat more flexible Benjamin Netanyahu (though not one seriously contemplating retirement; the charges against him are nonsense and just part of hardball Israeli politics). Israel would benefit from a government independent of the Arabs, the religious parties, or the far left.

The United States must lead an effective coalition response to the Iranian aggression against Saudi Arabia. The NATO states that import oil, especially from Saudi Arabia, should be forcefully invited to join in augmented sanctions, and the United States should require those countries that trade profitably with the U.S. to join an embargo of Iran until it genuinely renounces its sponsorship of terrorist enterprises, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and, as long as the Yemeni civil war is bilaterally deescalated, the Houthis. A serious coalition, including all the countries whose ships ply the Persian Gulf, should, under U.S. leadership, accomplish the internationalization of the Strait of Hormuz, and discourage by force any Iranian attempt to restrict those waters. And the U.S. must (at the expense of the beneficiary countries) install serious air security over Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, and northern Iraq. Foreign drones should never have got anywhere near the Saudi oil refineries and collection points and would not be especially hard to intercept. This attack was planned as meticulously as the 9/11 attacks and, like them, attempted to evade any particular national

responsibility. The fact that there was no suicide element may be taken as slight progress for the world's counterterrorists.

An air assault on Iranian oil facilities and nuclear military sites would be entirely justified, and this measure should be prepared as the next step, with the prior approval of a reasonable range of supportive countries, as the instant response to any further provocations. It would not be a great risk for the United States to lead a punitive air mission that would flatten Iran's nuclear military program and crush it economically, and such a step would arouse no objections from any civilized country. If the Saudis want to move to this more ambitious phase of retribution now, as long as the administration takes the time necessary to stiffen the backbone of the vocal but often almost invertebrate allies, and as long as it is planned carefully, there is no moral or practical reason to hesitate. Iran is an outlaw regime in chronic need of punishment, and the danger lies not in overreaction but in insufficient retaliation.