

The Saudi Arabia-Middle East Studies Love Affair Is Over



President Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, March 2017.

By A.J. Caschetta

There's a new political order taking shape in the Middle East, and it's shaking up the academic order that has dominated Middle East studies for over three decades. With Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and what's left of Assad's Syria on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Israel on the other, academics are finding new enemies and new allies. Saudi Arabia, once an important ally and benefactor of Middle East specialists, suddenly finds itself subjected to the contempt usually reserved for Israel.

Under the old order, the field of Middle East studies benefitted enormously from what Israeli diplomat [activist philanthropy](#)."

Universities were given millions of dollars, while individuals benefitted from the trickle-down effect with ample funding for conferences, academic publishing houses, and jobs. This greatly amplified professors' bias against Israel while pandering to Saudi sensibilities, helping to normalize reactionary Islam.

Now, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), Saudi Arabia has undertaken an impressive series of reforms, and yet he has become academia's newest target. But it's not only the Saudis under attack; the left is turning on its own.

For instance, last November when famed liberal columnist Thomas Friedman [open letter](#) to the *Times* by seven "Senior Middle East Scholars." The scholars labeled Friedman the prince's dupe and denounced his article as propaganda, suggesting in dictatorial fashion that he be "investigated and perhaps even suspended for writing it."

In rhetoric that recalls the left's treatment of Israeli leaders, MbS was described as "the mastermind of an illegal war that has devastated the lives of millions, and today borders on genocide." The real Arab Spring, they insisted, "was an attempt by young people . . . to democratize their political systems," and Friedman's misapplication of the phrase shows that he "is divorced from reality."

Granted, any Saudi reform package deserves a healthy dose of skepticism, and the [repressive nature](#) of previous Saudi royals has never been a secret, so why the frantic outburst over a prince who might actually diminish repression?

One component of the field's new hostility is its support for Saudi Arabia's nemesis, Iran. Many influential academics are convinced there are moderate forces within the Iranian regime that should be respected, and they continue [Qatar Media Corporation](#) that welcomes an anti-Saudi outlook. Perhaps the

luster of an *Al-Jazeera* article on one's radical chic resume will be diminished with the recent bipartisan [Mark LeVine](#), professor of modern Middle Eastern history at the University of California, Irvine. Lately, when he's not posting unhinged Facebook [pink washing](#)," LeVine (in *Al-Jazeera*, of course) [pronounced](#) that a door "seems to be opening in the kingdom – toward a more modern, more entrepreneurial, less-hidebound and more youth-oriented society."

As the new political order in the Middle East takes shape much remains uncertain, and only the daring and foolish make predictions. But here's an easy one: for the Middle East studies industry, the top priority will remain opposition to Israel and its allies, including Saudi Arabia.

A.J. Caschetta is a senior lecturer at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a fellow at Campus Watch, a project of the Middle East Forum, where he is a Shillman-Ginsburg fellow.