

Trump and the 'Management of Allies'

President Trump's emerging foreign policy is a jumble of mixed messages and bad optics, raising questions about how well he can manage allies, let alone adversaries, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

One commentator recently noted that if one wants to work out Donald Trump's foreign policy, it is not so hard: It's simply that it is the converse of whatever Barack Obama did. Ok, it's a quip. But like most good quips, there is a grain of truth to it, too.

President Obama – whether fairly or not – was heartily disliked in Israel and Saudi Arabia. So, we now have Trump proving that he is the true friend of both (sometimes simple motives do, also, at times underlie apparent grand strategy). Obama reached out to Iran; Trump just dumped on Iran. Obama talked multilateral grand strategy, Trump headlined his businessman “deal-making.”

Throwing out “red meat” to the assembled Sunni Emirs and monarchs – of a pilloried Iran held up as the malign fount of all terrorism – was, no doubt, intended to “somehow” balance President Trump's mild reproof to the Sunni world for its tolerance of extremism. All this was intended to go down well in Israel, too, thus hoeing the ground for Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner's ample ambition to make peace between Israel and the Palestinians (though when it came to it, the President had nothing to say in Israel. Indeed its whole import lay with that: what he did not say – and could not say).

So, it seems, this was the visit's prime intent: to escape Washington, with its bruising headaches for a few days; to showcase the President in the light which he most favors: closing business deals, bringing jobs to the U.S.; and repairing old alliances, damaged by Obama.

At least, the intent was clear. Except it didn't work. Trump's visit architect (reportedly Jared Kushner), and the speechwriter for this visit (reportedly Stephen Miller), messed up. The optics were terrible: the Saudi lavish, gilded welcome, may have seemed a welcome antidote to D.C.'s dark, foreboding, political “weather”; but that is not how it will be understood in the Middle East. The President's credibility will be impaired for a long time to come, as a result of poor advice. The images will come to haunt him.

A Message in Splendor

Did his staff not understand? Did they not grasp the tell-tale that the very

splendor of Trump's reception, the mounting of such a lustrous spectacle, before a summoned, and arrayed Sunni leadership: the high flattery, the acceptance of an honor, the lavishing of gifts, and finally, the acceptance of "a caravan" of money, was contrived intentionally to transmit a clear meaning?

By this means, Saudi Arabia has signaled to the attendant Sunni leaders, Trump's implicit acknowledgement of King Salman as leader of Arabia and of Islam. To put it bluntly, this is precisely how vassalage, how submission to political leadership, and of concomitant obligation that stems from it, is signaled in the Middle East. It will be understood so, across the globe.

Didn't Trump's speechwriter too, understand that when he was instructed to throw into the Presidential speech some "red meat" of Iranian demonization for "balance" that there are "boundaries" – albeit invisible boundaries – beyond which it is unadvisable to trespass? Was Trump not aware of the incongruity (if not to say the blatant inversion) when painting the Shi'a as unqualified "terrorists" from a platform in Saudi Arabia?

It was not at all well-crafted. The so-called balance could have been better handled. Is the author aware, for example, that it is the hundreds of thousands displaced Iraqi Shi'a, who have had their lands and villages seized, their homes razed, and their men butchered by ISIS, are now the backbone of the Iraqi PMU militia – the militia now labeled by Trump, as terrorist? Even in the Israeli press, many commentators found Trump's characterization of Iran as the ultimate bogeyman over-ripe (though Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu apparently, was ecstatic). Ordinary Israelis do have a grasp of the region and its realities.

The Sword Dance

And let us pass over the other poor "optics" to the trip: the embarrassing sword dance; the Trump ladies' lavish praise for Saudi Arabia's "advancement" of women; and First Lady Melania and Fight Daughter Ivanka's wearing of black and "veils" (as is customary) at the Vatican, while pointedly defying custom in the Muslim world. Saudis will have taken note.

So, was there a deeper intent in this wooing of the Gulf leadership? And if so, has it been impaired by its poor conception and implementation? Trump's ultimate objective has not been helped; rather, the tenor of his visit undoubtedly has complicated it.

Trump's need – for the rest of the year – is to have an "achievement." The fall of the ISIS-held cities of Raqqa and Mosul would allow the President reasonably to claim that he has defeated ISIS. Any stabilizing of Syria and tamping down

the conflict, would be a welcome cherry on the cake, as well.

On one hand, Russia is acting in Syria as the high-wire circus walker, carrying – seated, at one end of the balancing pole, Iran – with Turkey being the countervailing ballast, at the other extreme. Both, clearly, are necessary for Russia to maintain balance while walking the wire. Iran carries weight in Damascus, and Turkey is quartermaster to the armed insurgent forces. This represents one unit of the “management of allies” (an old Kissingeresque concept of balancing the region).

America is coordinating with Russia – and unlike the last Administration – is actively endorsing the Russian-led process, insisting that the armed “moderate” rebel movements cooperate, while disabusing them of any thoughts that the U.S. is about to militarily plunge in, decisively, in their favor, to overthrow the Syrian state.

At present, the U.S. is waiting on progress by Russia in implementing the de-escalation zones, and in managing an erratic Turkey, on the one hand, and Iran and its allies, on the other. The US wants Hizbullah and Iran “reined in” in Syria. The demonization of Iran in Trump’s speech in Riyadh and Israel, therefore, may have been intended by Trump (also) to strengthen Russia’s hand in managing, (i.e. “disciplining”) its allies. Russia, Iran and Turkey (threatened with the arming of the Syrian Kurds) are, in the Administration’s view, “on test.”

‘Managing’ the Gulf States

The complement to Russia’s management of its allies, of course, is America’s “management” of its own allies: the Gulf States. This is perhaps what was at the back of President Trump’s mind for the Saudi trip (even as closing “deals” and jobs back home, were at the front of his mind). Trump does not want Saudi to upend his hoped for victories in Raqa’a and Mosul.

That is to say, the full conceptualization is that Russia was to bring, and manage its allies, and America would try to bring the Sunni world too – were the Astana Process to gain some traction.

Is this prospect now finished? Well, as indicated above, the Saudis may have a reading of the meaning of Trump’s Riyadh visit *other than that* held by the White House.

Trump has uttered some incautious words on Iran, and the Saudis and Israel are likely to hold the U.S. President to their literal implementation – and will expect Trump to honor his obligations, within the meaning and the manner of his reception in Riyadh, and as born witness by virtually the full Sunni world.

Rex Tillerson in Riyadh was much more nuanced: saying that he fully expected to be talking with Iran – when the moment was ripe. Equally, Pentagon officials, at last week’s press briefing, went out of their way to signal, in wake of the al-Tanf incident when again U.S. forces bombed Syrian army soldiers, that the U.S. is not targeting Iranians in Syria – or Syrian forces. They suggested that the attack on Syrian forces was an error by a ground commander, and would not be repeated.

The central question – after Trump’s badly choreographed Saudi trip – is: will the Russians lose confidence in any meaningful U.S. participation in the Astana initiative?

The consequence of this would inevitably impinge on prospects for wider U.S.-Russian détente. Russia cannot afford to let the Astana initiative slip entirely: the defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda is a prime Russian national interest. Russia will likely conclude however, that Washington will have little prospect of “bringing in” Saudi Arabia to help actively with Astana (Israeli commentators in any event, are highly skeptical about the viability of the concept of a regional (Sunni-Israeli) alliance working, given Netanyahu’s political fragility).

Cost of Invective

And, Trump’s Iran invective will likely heighten Sunni objections to any role being given to Iran in the monitoring of the de-escalation zones, and any wider role in Syria. This will complicate matters considerably for Russia, and could ultimately unpick the Astana initiative.

If Trump cannot now “deliver” on the Sunnis, we might expect Moscow to be more assertive. Russia may concede perhaps the “Golan” de-escalation “triangle” to U.S. monitoring, but Russia is supporting Damascus’ forces and allies in restoring Syrian government control of southeast Syria, and the Syrian-Iraqi border. No buffer zone between Iraq and Syria – as the U.S. and Israel hoped – is what this means.

The following statement, perhaps, represents the first fallout from Trump’s anti-Shi’a positioning: Southfront reports that “the Iraqi government has officially confirmed a cooperation with Syria, Iran and Russia to secure the Syrian-Iraqi border. According to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, there is a cooperation between the four countries on this issue. The Iraqi media also [quoted] Iraqi officials [saying] that Iraq and its allies will not allow establishing of any ‘buffer zone’ between the two countries.”

Already, it is the Iraqi PMU militia who are participating actively in the

military operation, alongside Hizbullah and the Syrian army, *inside Syria*, to retake southeast Syria. While at the same time, Iraqi PMU militia are sealing the border, and severing the ISIS' Euphrates valley supply line, from the Iraqi side. This is important.

When I was in Iraq this month, I witnessed the mobilization and energization of the Iraqi "Shi'a nation." This not something instigated by Iran – it is an awakening directly related to the spreading war with ISIS in northern Iraq, and portends a shift of the center of political gravity within Iraq.

If Trump's embrace of the Sunni narrative against Iran and the Shi'a militia works to embolden Saudi Arabia in Syria and Yemen, then his 'red meat' comments on Iran and the Shi'a will further energize the ordinary Shi'a Iraqi "nation," despite its internal divisions.

The deeper question facing Moscow, however, is the significance of the continuing war of innuendo prosecuted by the U.S. "deep state" that is directed at President Trump, even in his absence overseas. There has been no letup in this campaign, but rather a doubling down. It seems its object is to zombify Trump's Administration, rather than to impeach the President.

There may a financial crisis later this year as the U.S. debt ceiling impacts at the beginning of October. The Federal Reserve is quietly warning investors that asset values may not be secure. All in all then, America is facing heightened uncertainties, and a contentious, possibly even violent, summer and autumn.

Bill Clinton when threatened by impeachment, went to war. A cornered Trump might too, go to war, or he could defy the "deep state," and make peace. Moscow must – and no doubt will – assess the probabilities carefully. Trump might even do both (launch war against North Korea and seek détente with Moscow).

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Believing the Russian 'Hacking' Claim

Government lies are common when seducing a population to support a war, but the Russian "hacking" claims are unusual in that U.S. officials supply no evidence while the "fact" is just assumed, as David Swanson explains.

By David Swanson

When the U.S. public was told that Spain had blown up the *Maine*, or Vietnam had returned fire, or Iraq had stockpiled weapons, or Libya was planning a massacre, the claims were straightforward and disprovable.

Before people began referring to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, somebody had to lie that it had happened, and there had to be an understanding of what had supposedly happened. No investigation into whether anything had happened could have taken as its starting point the certainty that a Vietnamese attack or attacks had happened. And no investigation into whether a Vietnamese attack had happened could have focused its efforts on unrelated matters, such as whether anyone in Vietnam had ever done business with any relatives or colleagues of Robert McNamara.

All of this is otherwise with the idea that the Russian government determined the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. U.S. corporate media reports often claim that Russia did decide the election or tried to do that or wanted to try to do that. But they also often admit to not knowing whether any such thing is the case.

There is no established account, with or without evidence to support it, of exactly what Russia supposedly did. And yet there are countless articles casually referring, as if to established fact to the . . .

“Russian influence in the 2016 presidential election” ([Yahoo](#)).

“Russian attempts to disrupt the election” ([New York Times](#)).

“Russian ... interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election” ([ABC](#)).

“Russian influence over the 2016 presidential election” ([The Intercept](#)).

“a multi-pronged investigation to uncover the full extent of Russia’s election-meddling” ([Time](#)).

“Russian interference in the US election” ([CNN](#)).

“Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential election” ([American Constitution Society](#)).

“Russian hacking in US Election” ([Business Standard](#)).”

“Obama Strikes Back at Russia for Election Hacking” we’re told by the [New York Times](#), but what is “election hacking”? Its definition seems to vary widely. And what evidence is there of Russia having done it?

The “Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections” even exists as a factual event in Wikipedia, not as an allegation or a theory. But the factual nature of it is not so much asserted as brushed aside.

Former CIA Director John Brennan, in the same Congressional testimony in which he took the principled stand “I don’t do evidence,” testified that “the fact that the Russians tried to influence resources and authority and power, and the fact that the Russians tried to influence that election so that the will of the American people was not going to be realized by that election, I find outrageous and something that we need to, with every last ounce of devotion to this country, resist and try to act to prevent further instances of that.” He provided no evidence.

Activists have even planned “demonstrations to call for urgent investigations into Russian interference in the US election.” They declare that “every day we learn more about the role Russian state-led hacking and information warfare played in the 2016 election.” (March for Truth.)

Belief that Russia helped put Trump in the White House is steadily rising in the U.S. public. Anything commonly referred to as fact will gain credibility. People will assume that at some point someone actually established that it was a fact.

Keeping the story in the news without evidence are articles about polling, about the opinions of celebrities, and about all kinds of tangentially related scandals, their investigations, and obstruction thereof. Most of the substance of most of the articles that lead off with reference to the “Russian influence on the election” is about White House officials having some sort of connections to the Russian government, or Russian businesses, or just Russians. It’s as if an investigation of Iraqi WMD claims focused on Blackwater murders or whether Scooter Libby had taken lessons in Arabic, or whether the photo of Saddam Hussein and Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands was taken by an Iraqi.

A general trend away from empirical evidence has been extensively noted and discussed. There is no more public evidence that Seth Rich (a Democratic National Committee staffer who was murdered last year) leaked Democratic emails than there is that the Russian government stole them. Yet both claims have passionate believers.

Still, the claims about Russia are unique in their wide proliferation, broad acceptance, and status as something to be constantly referred to as though already established, constantly augmented by other Russia-related stories that add nothing to the central claim. This phenomenon, in my view, is as dangerous as any lies and fabrications coming out of the racist right.

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