American foreign policy can be so retro, not to mention absurd. Despite being bogged down in more military interventions than it can reasonably handle, the Trump team recently picked a new fight — in Latin America. Uncle Sam kicked off a sequel to the Cold War with some of our southern neighbors, while resuscitating the boogeyman of socialism. In the process, National Security Advisor John Bolton treated us all to a new phrase, no less laughable than Bush-the-younger’s 2002 “axis of evil” (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea). He labeled Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua a “troika of tyranny.”

Alliteration no less! The only problem is that the phrase ridiculously overestimates both the degree of collaboration among those three states and the dangers they pose to their hegemonic neighbor to the north. Bottom line: in no imaginable fashion do those little tin-pot tyrannies offer either an existential or even a serious threat to the United States. Evidently, however, the phrase was meant to conjure up enough ill will and fear to justify the Trump team’s desire for sweeping regime change in Latin America. Think of it as a micro-version of Cold War 2.0.

Odds are that Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, both unrepentant neocons, are the ones driving this Latin
American Cold War reboot, even as, halfway across the planet, they’ve been pushing for war with Iran. Meanwhile, it’s increasingly clear that President Donald Trump gets his own kick out of being a “war president” and the unique form of threat production that goes with it.

Since it’s a recipe for disaster, strap yourself in for a bumpy ride. After all, the demonization of Latin American “socialists” and an ill-advised war in the Persian Gulf have already been part of our lived experience. Under the circumstances, remember your Karl Marx: history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce.

And add this irony to the grim farce to come: you need only look to the Middle East to see a genuine all-American troika of tyranny. I’m thinking about the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the military junta in Egypt, and the colonizing state of Israel – all countries that eschew real democracy and are working together to rain chaos on an already unstable region.

**America’s Favorite Kingdom**

The Saudi royals are among the worst despots around. Yet Washington has long given them a pass. Sure, they possess oodles of oil, black gold upon which the U.S. was once but no longer is heavily dependent. American support for those royals reaches back to World War II, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt took a detour after the Yalta Conference to meet King Ibn Saud and first struck the devilish deal that, in the decades to come, would keep the oil flowing. In return, Washington would provide ample backing to the kingdom and turn a blind eye to its extensive human rights
abuses.

Ultimately, this bargain proved as counterproductive as it was immoral. Sometimes the Saudis didn’t even live up to their end of the bargain. For example, they shut the oil spigot during the 1973 Yom Kippur War to express collective Arab frustration with Washington’s favoritism toward Israel. The royals also used their continual oil windfall to build religious schools and mosques throughout the Muslim world in order to spread the regime’s intolerant Wahhabi faith. From there, it was a relatively short road to the 9/11 attacks in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals (and not one was an Iranian).

More recently, in the Syrian civil war, Saudi Arabia even backed the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda franchise. That’s right, an American partner funded an offshoot of the very organization that took down the twin towers and damaged the Pentagon. For this there have been no consequences.

In other words, Washington stands shoulder to shoulder with a truly abhorrent regime, while simultaneously complaining bitterly about the despotism and tyranny of nations of which it’s less fond. The hypocrisy should be (but generally isn’t) considered staggering here. We’re talking about a Saudi government that only recently allowed women to drive automobiles and still beheads them for “witchcraft and sorcery.” Indeed, mass execution is a staple of the regime. Recently, the kingdom executed 37 men in a single day. (One of them was even reportedly crucified.) Most were not the “terrorists” they were made out to be, but dissidents from Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority convicted, as Amnesty International put it, “after sham trials that... relied on
confessions extracted through torture.”

During the Arab Spring of 2011, the Saudi royals certainly proved anything but friends to the budding democratic movements brewing across the region. Indeed, its military even invaded a tiny neighbor to the east, Bahrain, to suppress civil-rights protests by that country’s embattled Shia majority. (A Sunni royal family runs the show there.) In Yemen, the Saudis continue to terror bomb civilians in its war against Houthi militias. Tens of thousands have died — the exact number isn’t known — under a brutal bombing campaign and at least 85,000 Yemeni children have already starved to death thanks to the war and a Saudi blockade of what was already the Arab world’s poorest country. The hell unleashed on Yemen has been dubbed the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. It has already produced millions of refugees and, at present, the world’s worst cholera epidemic.

Through it all, Washington stood by its royals time and again, with The Donald far more gleefully pro-Saudi than his predecessors. His first foreign excursion, after all, was to that kingdom’s capital, Riyadh, where the president seemed to relish joining the martial pageantry of a Saudi “sword dance.” He also let it be known that the cash would keep flowing from the kingdom into military-industrial coffers in this country, announcing a supposedly record $110 billion set of arms deals (including a number closed by the Obama administration and ones that may never come to fruition). Son-in-law Jared Kushner even continues to maintain a bromance with the ambitious and brutal ruling Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.
In other words, with full support from Washington, sophisticated American weapons, and a boatload of American cash, Saudi Arabia continues to unleash terror at home and abroad. This much is certain: if you’re looking for a troika of tyrants, that country should top your list.

America’s Favorite Military Autocracy

The U.S. also backs — and Trump seems to love — Egypt’s military ruler Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. At a press conference at the White House in September 2017, the president leaned toward the general and announced that he was “doing a great job.” Hardly anyone inside the Beltway, in the media, or even on Main Street batted an eye. Washington has, of course, long supported Egypt’s various tyrants, including the brutal Hosni Mubarak who was overthrown early in the Arab Spring. Cairo remains the second largest annual recipient of American military aid at $1.3 billion annually. In fact, 75 percent of such aid goes to just two countries, the other being Israel. In a sense, Washington simply bribes both states not to fight each other. Now, that’s diplomacy for you!

So, how’s Egypt’s military using all the guns and butter the U.S. sends its way? Brutally, of course. After Mubarak was overthrown in 2011, Mohammed Morsi won a free and fair election. Less than two years later, the military, which abhors his Muslim Brotherhood organization, seized power in a coup. Enter General el-Sisi. And when Morsi supporters rallied to protest the putsch, the general, who had appointed himself president, promptly ordered his troops to open fire. At least 900 protesters were killed in what came to be known as the 2013 Rabaa Massacre. Since then, el-Sisi
has ruled with an iron fist, extending his personal power, winning a sham reelection with 97.8 percent of the vote, and pushing through major constitutional changes that will allow the generalissimo to stay in power until at least 2030. Washington, of course, remained silent.

El-Sisi has run a veritable police state, replete with human rights abuses and mass incarceration. Last year, he even had a show trial of 739 Muslim Brotherhood-associated defendants, 75 of whom were sentenced to death in a single day. He also uses “emergency” counterterrorism laws to jail peaceful dissidents. Thousands of them have gone before military courts. In addition, in U.S.-backed Egypt most forms of independent organization and peaceful assembly remain banned. Cairo even collaborates with its old enemy Israel to maintain a stranglehold of a blockade on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which the United Nations has termed “inhumane.”

Yet Egypt gets a hall pass from the Trump administration. It matters not at all that few places on the planet suppress free speech as effectively as Egypt now does – not since it buys American weaponry and generally does as Washington wants in the region. In other words, a diplomatic state of marital (and martial) bliss protects the second member of the real troika of tyranny.

America’s Favorite Apartheid State

Some will be surprised, even offended, that I include Israel in this imaginary troika. Certainly, on the surface, Israel’s democracy bears no relation to the political worlds of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Still, scratch below the gilded
surface of Israeli life and you’ll soon unearth staggering civil liberties abuses and a penchant for institutional oppression. After all, so extreme have been the abuses of ever more right-wing Israeli governments against the stateless Palestinians that even some mainstream foreign leaders and scholars now compare that country to apartheid South Africa.

And the label is justified. Palestinians are essentially isolated in the equivalent of open-air prisons in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – not unlike the bantustans of South Africa in the years when that country was white-ruled. In the impoverished, refugee-camp atmosphere of these statelets, Palestinians lack anything resembling civil rights. They can’t even vote for the Israeli prime ministers who lord it over them. What’s more, the Palestinian citizens of Israel (some 20 percent of the population), despite technically possessing the franchise, are systematically repressed in a variety of ways.

Evidence of an apartheid-style state is everywhere apparent in the Palestinian territories. In violation of countless international norms and U.N. resolutions, Israel imposes its own version of a police state – functionally, a military occupation of land legally possessed by Arabs. It has begun a de facto annexation of Palestinian land by building a “security wall” through Palestinian villages. Its military constructs special “Jewish only” roads in the West Bank linking illegal Israeli settlements, while further fracturing the fiction of Palestinian contiguity. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not only refused to withdraw those settlements or halt
the colonization of Palestinian territory by Jewish Israelis, but during the recent Israeli election promised to begin the actual annexation of the West Bank in his new term.

Israeli military actions are regularly direct violations of the principles of proportionality in warfare, which means that the ratio of Israeli to Palestinian casualties is invariably absurdly disproportionate. Since last spring, at least 175 Palestinians (almost all unarmed) have been shot to death by Israeli soldiers along the Gaza Strip fence line, while 5,884 others were wounded by live ammunition. Ninety-four of those had to have a limb amputated. A staggering 948 of the wounded were minors. In that period, just one Israeli died and 11 were wounded in those same clashes.

Life in blockaded Gaza is almost unimaginably awful. So stringent are the sanctions imposed that one prominent official in a leaked diplomatic cable admitted that Israeli policy was to “keep Gaza’s economy on the brink of collapse.” In fact, back in 2012, one of that country’s military spokesmen even indicated that food was being allowed into the blockaded strip on a 2,300 calories a day count per Gazan – just enough, that is, to avoid starvation.

Through it all, with Trump at the wheel, Netanyahu can feel utterly assured of the near limitless backing of the United States. The Trump team has essentially sanctioned all Israeli behavior, thereby legitimizing the present state of Palestinian life. Trump has moved the U.S. embassy to contested Jerusalem – admitting once and for all that Washington sees the holy city as the sole property of the
Jewish state — recognized the illegal Israeli annexation of the conquered Syrian Golan Heights, and increased the flow of military aid and arms to Israel, already the number-one recipient of such American largesse.

Sometimes, in the age of Trump, it almost seems as if “Bibi” Netanyahu were the one guiding American policy throughout the Middle East. No wonder Israel rounds out that troika of tyranny.

**Wag the Dog?**

Beyond their wretched human rights records and undemocratic tendencies, that troika has another particularly relevant commonality as the U.S. reportedly prepares for a possible war with Iran. Two of those countries — Israel and Saudi Arabia — desperately desire that the American military take on their Iranian nemesis. The third, Egypt, will go along with just about anything as long as Uncle Sam keeps the military aid flowing to Cairo. Think of it as potentially the ultimate “wag the dog” scenario, with Washington taking on the role of the dog.

This alone should make Washington officials cautious. After all, war with Iran would surely prove disastrous (whatever damage was done to that country). If you don’t think so, you haven’t been living through the last 17-plus years of this country’s forever wars. Unfortunately, no one should count on such caution from John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, or even Donald Trump.

So settle into your seats folks and prepare to watch the empire swallow the republic whole.
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