

Saudi crisis threatens wider war in the Middle East

Bill Van Auken
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The recent mass arrests in Saudi Arabia combined with the kidnapping of Lebanon's prime minister, the escalation of the war against Yemen and Riyadh's charge that both Iran and Lebanon have "declared war" against it point to an immense regional crisis that threatens to erupt into a wider conflict.

After more than a quarter century of uninterrupted US wars of aggression, occupations and regime-change operations that have claimed the lives of over a million people and driven many millions more from their homes, the Middle East is a powder keg.

Entire societies have been decimated by these interventions, from Iraq to Libya, Syria and Yemen. This immense bloodletting has as its primary driving force the attempts by US imperialism to offset the relative decline in its dominance over the capitalist world order by means of military force, particularly through the assertion of its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Despite the immense destructive power of the means employed, however, they have failed to achieve Washington's ends. After expending roughly \$2 trillion in resources and sacrificing the lives of over 4,400 US troops in Iraq and bringing tens of thousands back seriously wounded, the US has failed to achieve its aims of unquestioned dominance in the region. In Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the region, the US faces Iran as a significant regional rival, with Russia and China also challenging American capitalism for control of markets and energy resources.

The US response has been the stoking of ever-widening conflicts that threaten to drag the entire region into war, with the potential of drawing in the world's major nuclear powers as well.

The Trump administration has deliberately sought to provoke a direct conflict with Iran, refusing to certify its compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord negotiated with the Obama administration and the other major powers.

The nonsensical claims that Iran is not living up to the "spirit" of the agreement, i.e., bowing to US demands for the country's disarmament and complete subordination to American interests in the Middle East, have led to a ratcheting up of tensions with Tehran and are setting the stage for direct military conflict.

With his trip to Riyadh last May, Trump laid the foundations for a Sunni sectarian alliance against Iran based upon the reactionary oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf led by Saudi Arabia. This US policy has essentially given a carte blanche to the Saudi regime to carry out repression at home and escalate military violence and provocations throughout the region.

This orientation has been confirmed by the reaction of the White House to the sweeping purge launched by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman involving the arrest of some of the most powerful figures in the kingdom, including a dozen princes, current and former ministers and one of the country's wealthiest billionaires, all under the pretext of battling "corruption." In reality, the crackdown, accompanied by the placing of allies of the crown prince in key positions, is part of a consolidation of power in the hands of the most bellicose and anti-Iranian faction within the regime.

This was accompanied by the Saudi regime's summoning last week of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri to Riyadh. Credible reports indicate that when Hariri arrived in the Saudi capital, his plane was surrounded by police, his cellphone was confiscated and he was detained until he read a prepared speech over Saudi state media resigning his position and denouncing both Iran and the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah. The Saudi monarchy apparently decided that Hariri, a Sunni who holds joint Saudi-Lebanese citizenship, had to be removed because he failed to adopt a policy of breaking with Hezbollah, which forms a major part of his government. He and his family appear to remain hostages of the House

of Saud.

The initial response of the Trump administration, as well as that of the corporate media, to these extraordinary developments was essentially to echo the line from Riyadh, casting bin Salman as a “reformer.”

“I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing,” Trump tweeted in response to the arrests.

Similarly, the Trump administration unconditionally backed unsubstantiated claims that a rocket fired from Yemen toward Riyadh’s international airport had been supplied by Iran. The Saudi response, also fully supported by Washington, has been to escalate its near-genocidal war against the Yemeni people, stepping up bombings and closing all of the country’s borders and ports to relief supplies. The UN has warned that this tightening of the US-backed blockade threatens to unleash a famine of world-historic proportions, claiming the lives of millions.

While succeeding in killing some 12,000 Yemenis and razing the poorest society in the Arab world to the ground, the Saudi military has proven incapable of conquering the country. This failure is of a piece with its unsuccessful attempt to blockade Qatar into submission and the disintegration of the Islamist Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” that it sponsored in Syria. Its response is to up the ante with threats of war with Iran.

In recent days, sections of the US ruling establishment and media have begun to voice concern over these events, largely from the standpoint that the shakeup in Riyadh and Saudi provocations in the region could expose the House of Saud as a house of cards. Attempting to consolidate power in his own hands, bin Salman risks destabilizing the regime and opening up the threat of a revolt from below in a country that is one of the most unequal on the face of the planet and is plagued by mounting economic, social and political crises driven by the fall in oil prices.

Thus, the *New York Times* published an editorial noting that if Iran had been carrying out actions similar to those of the Saudi regime, there would have been expressions of “outrage” from Trump, the US Congress and others within the ruling establishment. The *Times* hastens to add, however, “There’s a big difference, of course, between Saudi Arabia and Iran; the former is an American ally, the latter an antagonist.” This recalls nothing so much as Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s explanation of US support for the blood-soaked Nicaraguan dictatorship of General Somoza: “He may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”

Washington Post, for its part, drew ~~the~~ parallels between the House of Saud and the House of Trump, noting the US president’s “disdain for courts and for the media” and “scorn for ethical norms,” and pointing to the trip by his son-in-law Jared Kushner to Riyadh shortly before the arrests.

To the extent that these rather muted expressions of concern express disagreements within US ruling circles, they are of an entirely tactical character. Democratic and Republican administrations alike have for more than seven decades supported the Saudi monarchy, one of the most reactionary regimes on the face of the planet, as a linchpin of US policy in the Middle East, arming it to the teeth.

Differences revolve around whether the headlong rush to a regional war in the Middle East will only undermine broader US strategic interests in relation to its buildup toward confrontation with China and Russia. It also threatens to further provoke conflict with Washington’s nominal European allies in NATO, who have shown little inclination to follow Washington down the path to war against Iran, a country where they are seeking profitable markets and investments.

Whatever these tactical differences, the political events in the Middle East, with the kidnapping of a prime minister, provocative statements about “declarations of war,” and, of course, the US and Russia pursuing diametrically opposed aims in Syria by military means, more and more echo the kind of regional conflicts, particularly in the Balkans, that gave rise to the First World War.

The threat of mankind being dragged into a Third World War, this time with nuclear weapons, can be countered only by the international working class, mobilizing its independent strength on the basis of a socialist program aimed at putting an end to capitalism, the source of war and social inequality.



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