

Feigning moral outrage, the Times' Thomas Friedman comes to the defense of the Saudi killer regime

Barry Grey
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Leave it to Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times'* chief foreign affairs commentator, to outdo his colleagues at the nation's foremost sounding board for CIA propaganda when it comes to hypocrisy and deceit. This he has achieved in an op-ed piece on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi published in Wednesday's print edition under the headline "America's Dilemma in Saudi Arabia."

Friedman played a key role in promoting the unprovoked and illegal US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, a war crime that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and laid waste to the entire country. He cavalierly shifted from one pretext to another, penning columns promoting the war as a key front in the post-9/11 "war on terror," a crusade for democracy in the Middle East and a naked war for oil.

He has since backed every US act of military aggression, including the wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria, which have killed tens of thousands more innocent people, turned millions into homeless refugees, and transformed the entire region into a killing field. He maintains a complicit silence on the US drone murder program and Washington's key role in the Saudi-led bloodbath in Yemen, which has already killed upwards of 50,000 people and threatens another 14.1 million with starvation, according to the United Nations.

None of this fazes him. He—and his newspaper—are ruthless and ardent exponents of the violent drive by US imperialism to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

But of the torture and murder within the Saudi consulate in Istanbul of the former Saudi regime insider-turned columnist for the *Washington Post*, he writes, "The depravity and cowardice of that is just disgusting."

He goes on to directly accuse the de facto ruler of the House of Saud, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,

affectionately referred to in the Western media as MBS, of complicity in the crime:

"I do not believe for a second that it was a rogue operation and that Saudi Arabia's effective ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is very hands-on, had no prior knowledge, if not more ... not as a journalist, but as an American citizen, I am sickened to watch my own president and his secretary of state partnering with Saudi officials to concoct a cover story."

His supposed moral indignation notwithstanding, Friedman poses the problem of how to respond to this crime from the "practical" standpoint of imperialist *Realpolitik*, i.e., the interests of the tiny American corporate-financial oligarchy.

"How should America think about balancing our values and our interests going forward?" he asks. He then proceeds to tout what he calls "MBS' reform agenda." The only examples he is able to summon of this supposedly progressive program is bin Salman's order to allow some women to drive and his decision to reopen cinemas.

He makes no mention of the brutal crackdown bin Salman carried out last year against rivals within the Saudi ruling elite, detaining princes, former government ministers and businessmen, torturing them and extracting billions of dollars in exchange for their release—all in the name of combating corruption. Realizing that he was among those being targeted, Khashoggi fled to the US and became a public critic of the crown prince.

Nor does Friedman mention the more than 150 Saudis beheaded by sword in 2017 and the 48 more put to death in the same way—half for non-violent crimes—in the first four months of this year. Or the stonings and similar barbaric practices, or the ruthless repression against any expression of popular opposition.

He makes no suggestion that bin Salman should be overthrown or prosecuted for his role in the murder of Khashoggi, writing, “Personally, I don’t care if Saudi Arabia is ruled by MBS, SOS or KFC.”

He then seeks to resurrect the discredited “war on terror,” declaring “our most important national interest in Saudi Arabia since 9/11” to be “*Islamic religious reform...*” (Friedman’s emphasis). He complains, “We have spent thousands of lives and some \$2 trillion trying to defuse the threat of Muslim extremists—from Al Qaeda to ISIS—dollars that could have gone to so many other needs in our society.”

Nothing here about the millions of Iraqis, Libyans, Syrians and Yemenis killed, wounded and displaced in the fraudulent “war on terror,” or the fact that the US has conducted these wars in alliance with Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces, and continues to do so in Syria and Yemen.

It becomes clear that the so-called “religious reform” championed by Friedman is a cosmetic facelift for the semi-feudal regime to give it a pseudo-democratic gloss, including ending the “cynical bargain” that allows the regime to “treat your women however you want.”

Bemoaning the fact that “the promise of MBS ... is finished,” Friedman gets to the heart of his concerns over the Khashoggi murder. “MBS may be able to hold onto power in Saudi Arabia,” he writes, “but his whole reform program required direct foreign investment—and money has been flowing out of Saudi Arabia for months, not in. Now it will get worse ... without sweeping social, economic and religious reforms, Saudi Arabia could well become a huge failed state.”

Washington and Wall Street have seen the ascension of bin Salman as an opening for US big business to more effectively exploit the vast oil resources and cheap labor in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the US ruling class is acutely aware that the venal regime sits atop a social powder keg. It has made this rotten and precarious regime its chief ally in the Arab world and, along with Israel, the basis of an alliance in the region to destabilize and ultimately militarily attack Iran. But the fall in oil prices, the vast sums expended by Riyadh for the wars in Syria and Yemen and the internal conflicts within the regime have frightened international investors, compounding the monarchy’s crisis.

The *Times* and other media critical of Trump have seized on the Khashoggi killing to step up their criticism of his decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear accord, not because they are opposed in principle to a war

for regime-change in Iran, but because they see his action as a reckless diversion that has isolated the US from its nominal allies in Europe and distracted attention from the more pressing confrontation with Russia and China.

The newspaper has published a series of editorials denouncing Trump for not pulling out of bin Salman’s investors’ conference, dubbed “Davos in the desert,” set for later this month. But it has failed to explain why, in the midst of the relentless repression of the regime and its near-genocidal war in Yemen, it had agreed to become an official sponsor of the gathering in the first place.

For all his moral effluvia, Friedman ends up by recommending a policy of stay the course, at most “finding some way to censure MBS ... without seeming to attack the whole Saudi people and destabilize the country. And we have to make sure that the social/religious reform process in Saudi Arabia proceeds—whoever is in charge there.”

In the end his only concrete proposal is to pressure Trump to fill the vacant post of US ambassador to the kingdom.

Friedman personally and the *Times* as a whole are up to their eyeballs in the blood and filth of bin Salman and his criminal regime. In the midst of MBS’ crackdown on rivals within the Saudi elite, in November of 2017, Friedman published a sycophantic panegyric to the supposed great reformer titled “Saudi’s Arab Spring.”

This set the stage for the crown prince’s triumphant two-and-a-half week tour of the US last March, during which he was feted by Wall Street bankers, tech moguls, Hollywood movers and shakers and politicians of both political parties. The list of notables who lined up to hail the great man in New York, Washington, Seattle, Los Angeles and other cities includes Trump, Michael Bloomberg, Rupert Murdoch, John Kerry, Henry Kissinger, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Oprah Winfrey.

The American ruling elite and its scribblers such as Friedman bear moral and political responsibility not only for the murder of Khashoggi, but the far more massive crimes of the House of Saud against the international working class.



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