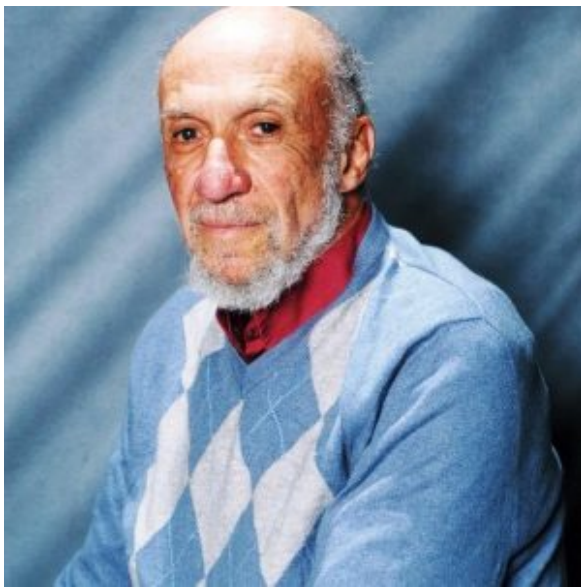


“Trump Feels A Kinship With Authoritarian Leaders”: Richard Falk On Turmoil In The Middle East



Prof.em. Richard Falk

Since Trump's visit to the Middle East, the region is experiencing new forms of turmoil, with the boycott against Qatar by several Gulf countries and Egypt reflecting the manifestation of geopolitical rivalries encouraged by Trump's support for dictatorial regimes in the region willing to join the US in the fight against terrorism. For the latest developments in the Middle East, Truthout spoke with Richard Falk, emeritus professor of international relations at Princeton University, who is now in the region for a series of public lectures.

C.J. Polychroniou: Richard, you are traveling and lecturing at the moment in the Middle East. How are the media in countries like Lebanon, Israel and Turkey treating Trump's policies in the region, and what's your reading of the mood on the ground among common folk?

Richard Falk: I have just arrived in Istanbul after spending several days in Beirut. While in Lebanon, in addition to giving a public lecture at the end of a cultural

festival on the theme, “The rise of populism, Trumpism, and the decline of US leadership,” I had the opportunity to interact with a wide range of people. As far as Trump is concerned, there was virtual unanimity that he is worsening an already volatile situation in the region. His trip to Riyadh was viewed in Beirut as a stunning display of incompetence and bravado, topped off by succumbing to a Saudi/Israeli regional agenda focused on building a menacing anti-Iran coalition and misleading publicity surrounding a nominal commitment to join forces to combat ISIS (also known as Daesh). Trump was viewed as a leader who did not understand the region and was more interested in pushing destabilizing arms sales than in genuinely promoting stability and conflict resolution.

Why is Qatar singled out on terror when it is a well-known fact that Saudi Arabia has been a chief supporter of the most radical ideological version of Islam, and Turkey’s President Erdogan has been accused of aiding ISIS and other extremists against Kurds and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad?

The short answer is geopolitics. Saudi Arabia, like Israel, has a “special relationship” with the United States, meaning that in diplomatic practice, Washington adopts a subservient posture that includes seeing the world through a distorted optic provided by the Saudi monarchy. Trump did not initiate this American tendency to avert its eyes when it comes to the massive evidence of Saudi support for Islamic extremism, but he seems to be carrying further this form of geopolitical [ignorance].

When it comes to Turkey, the American attitude is ambivalent, regarding Turkey as a sufficiently important strategic partner via NATO, as well as the site of the important American Incirlik Air Base to justify looking the other way when it comes to indications of earlier Turkish support for ISIS in the context of implementing its anti-Assad Syrian policies. Of course, there is evidence of contradictions along similar lines with respect to pre-Trump US policies in Syria. All hands are dirty with regard to Syria. The Syrian people are continuing to pay a huge price for this mixture of internal struggle and a multilevel proxy war engaging regional and global actors.

Singling out Qatar is the strongest instance of the Saudi regional game. Saudi Arabia has long been bothered by the relative independence of Qatar in relation to a series of issues that have nothing to do with terrorism. These include the creation of Al Jazeera, a show of sympathy for the Arab Spring movements of

2011, asylum for the Muslim Brotherhood leadership after the Sisi coup of 2013, hosting Hamas leaders and tangible support for the Palestinian struggle — including aid to Gaza, and relatively friendly relations with Iran partly as a result of sharing a huge natural gas field.

The “terrorism” angle is a cover story that hides the real objective of the anti-Qatar policy, which is to assert Saudi hegemony with respect to all Gulf monarchies, and to make an example of Qatar so as to demonstrate that there is no room for either challenging Saudi primacy or departing from its policies of hostility to Shia governments and political Islam — that is, organizations within countries that build grassroots support for political movements among Muslims seeking control of the national governance process. Saudi policies, as in relation to Egypt, show a strong preference for authoritarian secular rule over an Islamically-oriented movement that achieved control of the state through electoral victories.

Saudi Arabia has two regional enemies: Shia Iran and political Islam, whether or not Sunni. Riyadh is sectarian when it serves Saudi regional interests in countering Iran, and repressive toward any kind of challenge directed at dictatorial government and monarchical authority, even if religiously oriented in its political identity. One dimension of its policy is directed toward sustaining royal authority at home, another is preoccupied with Gulf hegemony, another with crushing any democratizing movement in the region, and still another with its anti-Iran rivalry. When it comes to ISIS and jihadism, Saudi policy sends the West an anti-terrorist message while continuing to spend billions on disseminating Wahhabi versions of Islam far and wide.

The United States is more confused than Saudi Arabia when it comes to Qatar, but equally ineffectual if anti-terrorism truly tops its regional agenda. For one thing, Qatar is not a supporter of ISIS or of terrorism except to some extent in the context of Syria, where it is on the same side as Saudi Arabia, the United States and Turkey — each of which has from time to time made expedient use of anti-Assad Sunni terrorist groups. For another, the United States maintains a major military base in Qatar staffed by 11,000 American troops. For another, while celebrating the post-Riyadh moves against Qatar, the US has concluded a \$12 billion arms sales arrangement with Doha. While Trump boasts about his role in crafting the anti-Qatar policies as a triumph of counterterrorism, the American secretaries of state and defense are vigorously trying to bring the confrontation

with Qatar to an end through diplomatic mediation, illustrating policy incoherence between the White House and the governmental bureaucracy.

Do you think Donald Trump's warm embrace of dictatorial regimes and authoritarian leaders in the region — including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey — represents a new development in US foreign policy toward the Middle East?

Trump clearly feels a kinship with dictatorial regimes and authoritarian leaders throughout the world, and not just in the Middle East. As suggested earlier, the attitude toward Erdoğan is more complicated because of NATO considerations and overall Syrian policy coordination, and reflects a pre-Trump pragmatism with respect to the interface between American opposition to repressive government and the pursuit of a post-Cold War grand strategy in the Middle East and around the world. Trump is far less conflicted about embracing authoritarian leaders than his predecessors, especially Obama. In this sense, Trump's affection for autocratic governance patterns cannot be fully explained by the pragmatic priorities of earlier American leaders. It seems to reflect an ideological affinity that is independent of foreign policy goals. The sheer hypocrisy of Trump's approach to such choices has been recently underscored by his rollback of Obama's moves to normalize relations with Cuba because of its allegedly poor human rights record. Interpreted more transparently, this Trump move was a political payback to the support given his presidential campaign by Miami's right-wing Cuban exile community.

If we consider the question of whether Trump's comfort level with authoritarian governance should be regarded as a real change in American foreign policy toward the Middle East, we can only say now that it is too early to tell. There is no doubt that Trump's visit and talk to the 50 leaders of Muslim countries assembled in Riyadh allowed the most authoritarian among Islamic rulers (Iran excepted) a welcome sigh of relief. It meant they would no longer have to listen sullenly to lectures delivered by a liberal American president about the importance of observing human rights.

This may also help explain the closer policy coordination between the US and Gulf Arabs, illustrated by agreeing to ramp up pressure on Iran. The intensification of American hostility to Iran is more likely to flow from Trump's eagerness to please Israel than to be responsive to Saudi guidance. Unlike the Qatar initiative, which

seems to disturb [US Secretary of Defense] James Mattis and [US Secretary of State] Rex Tillerson, the anti-Iran moves seem compatible with a shared militarist hostility to Iran, which is misleadingly blamed for spreading terrorism in the region through Tehran's support for such diverse groups as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis.

Now that ISIS is weakening, tensions and sectarian passions in the Middle East are actually on the rise. Any connection between the two factors?

ISIS certainly seems to be in the process of losing its territorial base and caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but whether it is really weakening overall is hard to tell. It has spread its terrorist operations to many countries throughout the world and still seems capable of causing havoc in Europe and the United States by using native sympathizers to mount terrorist attacks that inflame targeted societies.

With respect to the apparent rise of sectarian passions, there is a need for careful assessment. Sectarianism is used to mobilize support for the anti-Iran coalition and the Syrian War in Sunni-majority countries, but a more convincing explanation of these policies would emphasize the Saudi-Iran rivalry for regional hegemony based on competing expansionist aspirations. Sectarianism accounts for political alignments in Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where Sunni rule feels threatened by Shia minorities — in Yemen and Saudi Arabia — and a Shia majority in Bahrain. As suggested earlier, where Sunni popular movements are perceived as threatening to the Arab monarchies, Sunni rulers will not hesitate to use or encourage bloody repressive tactics. In this respect, sectarian justifications for alignments are misleading unless interpreted as opportunistic. A more adequate understanding of Arab politics can be gained by evaluating intergovernmental tensions in the Middle East and related efforts to sustain the stability of existing political structures in the face of internal threats.

Both Jordan and Lebanon have managed to avoid becoming ISIS targets. What are the reasons for this?

I think there is no definitive explanation. It appears that ISIS is rather opportunistic in its selection of target societies, as well as in its tendency to treat some states as off-limits. By and large, where ISIS has enjoyed its greatest success in the Middle East and North Africa has been in countries experiencing chaos, combat and unrest, especially in contexts of American or European

intervention.

Turkey and Iran have been targeted by ISIS, although neither can be considered chaotic or a combat zone. Turkey has been targeted in all likelihood in retaliation for switching from aiding and abetting ISIS to policies of belligerent opposition. There may be sectarian reasons for ISIS attacks on Iran, although this is highly conjectural. There are also rumors about various bargains struck by ISIS with governments and wealthy donors to engage in or refrain from certain attacks.

Jordan has been comparatively stable over the course of the last decade, which means that they do not seem to be the kind of society that ISIS targets. In addition, neither Lebanon nor Jordan has been active in anti-terrorist regional politics, although ISIS and Hezbollah are on opposite sides in Syria, and have there engaged in violent combat. There is very little public knowledge about the operational side of ISIS behavior, which means that either of these countries could come under pressure from ISIS militants at some future time.

How do you see the “Palestinian question” playing out under Trump’s administration?

Everything about Trump’s political style makes his position at one time subject to drastic revision almost on impulse. Up to now, Trump seems to be investing energy in the idea that a deal can be struck. This is highly unlikely to materialize, principally because Israel seems to be moving toward an imposed one-state solution, with its “Plan B” being a long-term apartheid administration of Palestinian territories that initially fell under its control 50 years ago in the 1967 War. The idea of revived negotiations seems like a Washington stunt that is given lip service by the Israeli government for public relations purposes and endorsed by the Palestinian Authority because of its weakness and vulnerability to the cutoff of foreign funding. Given the accelerated expansion of settlement-building, as well as the sheer number of settlers — numbering at least 700,000 if the West Bank and East Jerusalem are combined — the situation seems ill-suited for a political compromise envisioned by the two-state international consensus. In other words, a diplomatically induced end of the conflict seems currently implausible.

Palestinian prospects are increasingly dismal. The Trump presidency is not disposed to challenge Israeli policies, or to exert pressure on Israel to yield significant ground as to the manner with which it is administering the Palestinian

people. The American ambassador at the UN, Nikki Haley, is outdoing herself by constant[ly] bashing the UN for its supposed anti-Israel bias. Whether these tactics of intimidation will result in a gradual disappearance of Palestinian grievances from the UN agenda remains to be seen, but it is clearly a major Israeli objective. It seems that with armed struggle no longer a threat and diplomacy at a dead end, the only real worry for Israel is the mobilization of hostile public opinion under UN auspices.

Palestinian hopes, such as they are, depend on several developments: continuing growth of the global solidarity movement as most vividly expressed by the BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] campaign, which is the centerpiece of “the legitimacy war” that has been discrediting Israel’s policies and practices while giving the high moral and legal ground to the Palestinian national movement; eventual achievement of sustainable Palestinian unity, overcoming the rift between Hamas and Fatah; and more tangible expressions of solidarity by Arab neighbors with the Palestinian struggle.

If none of these Palestinian hopes ... materialize in the next decade, the Palestinian struggle will increasingly come to be seen as a “lost cause.” What Trump does and doesn’t do is likely to influence perceptions as to whether the Palestinian goals are credible or not, but at this point, the policy impact of the Trump presidency seems mainly to be emboldening Israeli hardliners.

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