

## Iran & Saudi Arabia, Thelma & Louise

By Thomas L. Friedman  
The New York Times, Nov. 6, 2018

**We made two bets, and the Iranians and the Saudis responded with their worst impulses.**



An Iranian protester demonstrating in Tehran on Sunday. Atta Kenare/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

With each passing day, U.S. policy toward Iran and Saudi Arabia more closely resembles the 1991 film classic “Thelma & Louise.”

For those too young to remember, the movie starred Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, two gal pals, whose fishing trip turns dark after Sarandon’s character shoots a would-be rapist, triggering one of the all-time great movie lines: “You shoot off a guy’s head with his pants down, believe me, Texas ain’t the place you want to get caught.” This eventually prompts the women to escape the police by dramatically driving their 1966 Thunderbird off a cliff into the Grand Canyon to their deaths.

What’s this have to do with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.? Well, if you look back at U.S. Mideast policy over the last decade, what do you see? You see the Obama team looking at Iran and Saudi Arabia and saying: The Saudis are drifting and will never deliver on Arab-Israel peace or real reform at home, so let’s bet on Iran — let’s bet that the best way to tilt the region onto a better path is by promoting

denuclearization and reform in Iran, which is a real civilization, with empowered women and a pro-Western middle class.

So, the Obama team forged the Iran nuclear deal, which curbed Iran's development of nuclear weapons for at least 15 years, in return for a lifting of U.S. sanctions — and with the hoped-for byproduct of opening Iran up to the world, thereby strengthening moderates there against the hard-line Revolutionary Guards.

And how did that work out?

Iran denuclearized, but the Revolutionary Guards used the release of pressure and fresh cash and investments from the West to further project their power into the Sunni Arab world, consolidating the grip of Iran's proxies over four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Sana and Beirut.

Worse, Iran and its Lebanese Shiite mercenary army, Hezbollah, joined with Syria's pro-Shiite regime in suppressing any chance of power-sharing with Syrian rebels and helped that regime ethnically cleanse Sunnis from key districts in Syria. Iran and its mercenaries also winked at Syria's genocidal use of poison gas and barrel bombs, which contributed mightily to the death toll from the Syrian civil war of some 500,000 people, with 11 million people displaced.

Iran's imperial overstretch was halted only by the Israeli Air Force dealing a heavy blow to Iranian units in Syria when Iran sent missiles there to attack Israel.

I thought the Iran deal was a bet worth making. No regrets. It did curb Iran's nuclear program — a big deal — but it did nothing to moderate Iran's regional behavior, which was never part of the pact. Indeed, it may have been the price of it, as Iran's supreme leader seemed to compensate for making the deal with the "American devil" by allowing the Revolutionary Guards a freer hand to project their power.

Then came President Trump.

He tore up the Iran deal, reimposed sanctions on Tehran and vowed to advance U.S. interests in the region by selling \$110 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia and betting on the young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, M.B.S., who had removed the religious police from the streets in Saudi Arabia — a big deal — granted women the right to drive and brought cinema and Western-style concerts to the desert kingdom, all while snuffing out any dissent.

Barack Obama's bet on Iran made sense, but it required the U.S. and its allies to also restrain Iran's malign regional influences *from the outside*. Trump's bet on M.B.S. also made sense — we had a huge interest in his curbing the export of puritanical Saudi Salafist Islam, extreme versions of which inspired the hijackers of 9/11, the Taliban and ISIS.

But to get the best and cushion the worst of the impulsive M.B.S., the U.S. needed to restrain him *from the inside*. We needed a strong U.S. ambassador or special envoy in Riyadh — or a president — to draw red lines for M.B.S. Trump did none of that, leaving M.B.S.'s maintenance largely to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.



Soldiers loyal to Saudi-led coalition forces guarding ships docked in the Yemeni port of Aden. Saleh Al-Obeidi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

And so, like the Iranians, M.B.S. used his *carte blanche* from America to project power and stretch far beyond his capabilities: intervening in Yemen, blockading Qatar, abducting the prime minister of Lebanon, cracking down on women driving activists and permitting, if not ordering, his team to murder moderate Saudi democracy advocate Jamal Khashoggi.

Do you see a pattern here?

In both cases the U.S. hoped that limited bets on Iran and Saudi Arabia moderating their most toxic behaviors might lead to better outcomes in the region, and for U.S. interests. Instead, both countries used the additional maneuvering room and resources that we gave them to drive right over the cliff.

To put it cinematically, Iran and Saudi Arabia did the full *Thelma & Louise*. But, this being the Middle East, they did it in separate cars.

For instance, M.B.S. *abducted* the prime minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri. But Iran's Hezbollah *murdered* the former prime minister of Lebanon, Saad's father, Rafik Hariri, to make sure he did not return to power. Meanwhile, Denmark just accused Iran of sending intelligence agents to assassinate an Iranian Arab opposition leader living in exile in Denmark, and France just expelled an Iranian diplomat after a failed plot to carry out a bomb attack at the Paris rally of an Iranian opposition group.

I note this not to distract from the Saudi murder and unspeakable dismemberment of Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia, and whoever was involved there, must be punished for that. (This was no rogue operation. There has never been such a rogue operation in the history of Saudi Arabia.)

I note this simply to point out that this whole region is in the grip of an incredibly self-destructive cycle of tribal, political and sectarian madness — Persians versus Arabs, Shiites versus Sunnis, Egyptian government versus democracy activists, Saudis versus Qataris, Alawites versus Sunnis, Islamists versus Christians, Israelis versus Palestinians, Yemeni Houthis versus Yemeni Sunnis, Turks versus Kurds and Libyan tribes versus Libyan tribes. So much hate, in so many directions.

“People talk as if America's choices in the Middle East are between ‘good allies,’ like Saudi Arabia, and ‘bad adversaries,’ like Iran, but our actual choices are between bad allies and bad adversaries,” observed Karim Sadjadpour, Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment.

I have been [arguing since December](#) — with wasted breath — that M.B.S. should have been competing with the Iranians by trying to “out-reform” them. When M.B.S. permitted Saudi women to attend sporting events, like soccer games, with men, Iran's ayatollahs still had not done so for their women, and [Iranian women were loudly complaining](#) that Saudi women had rights that they didn't.

The last thing the Saudis should have been trying to do was compete with Iran in projecting power in the region through underground networks. The Iranians have 40 years of experience coercing neighbors and killing adversaries through proxies like Hezbollah — always expertly, with plausible deniability. The Saudis, by contrast, have 40 years of experience co-opting neighbors and dissidents *by writing checks*. That was their core competency.

What happened under M.B.S. was that he wanted to play like the big boys in the neighborhood. He, and some of the young, testosterone-filled tough guys around him, wanted to project power like Iran, intimidate Lebanese prime ministers like the Revolutionary Guards and send hit teams to wipe out opponents like the Israeli Mossad.

But it was all far beyond the competency of the Saudi Air Force, Saudi diplomats and Saudi intelligence services, and it all ended up in the crazy, vile, incredibly stupid

murder of Khashoggi in the Saudis' own consulate in Istanbul, with only implausible deniability.

An American president's job is to understand that all the key players out there have multiple agendas. Some agendas align with our interests — did we forget that Iran helped us defeat the Taliban after 9/11? — but many conflict with them.

We need to extract the best we can from them, curb and offset their worst impulses — and get off oil as fast as we can to reduce our exposure to this madness.

***Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).***

Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist. He joined the paper in 1981, and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including "From Beirut to Jerusalem," which won the National Book Award. [@tomfriedman](#) • [Facebook](#)