

# The Guns of November

The calendar is currently full of anniversaries and commemoration of major events that happened exactly 100 year ago, during or in the aftermath of World War I, such as the [Balfour Declaration on Nov. 2](#). A particularly horrendous anniversary is already more than three years old; namely, the outbreak of World War I, famously dubbed "The Guns of August," by Barbara Tuchman. Unfortunately, recent events force inescapable comparisons to August 1914, with Lebanon playing the role of Serbia and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salmon (MBS) of Saudi Arabia as a far too believable Kaiser Wilhelm II, the chief villain back then, though there was (and is) far more than enough blame to go around. Will things now turn out as they did then?

As anyone who's looked at the news during the last week knows already, MBS last weekend orchestrated (likely demanded) the resignation of Said Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, a Sunni Muslim who has always been close to the Saudis (he's even a Saudi citizen). Hariri made the announcement from Riyadh, and is still there, leading to strong suspicions he is being detained, though he denied that a week later. Simultaneously, MBS was "appointed" head of a new anti-corruption agency and [immediately arrested](#) perhaps 500 leading Saudis on corruption charges, including 11 royal princes, i.e., his cousins. There is no doubt that MBS is using this to change the kingdom from a comfortable oligarchy run for the benefit of the several thousand descendants of its founder, Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, into an autocratic dictatorship a la Putin, Erdogan, Xi, Orban, Duterte, and presumably the dreams of Donald Trump.

In fact, MBS resembles Trump more than any of the others, being similarly impetuous and inexperienced, though MBS has a better excuse; he is 31 while Trump is forty years his senior. Trump, clearly still glowing from his Saudi welcome in May and its purchase of \$110 billion in US arms, has put himself foursquare behind his young friend. Trump also, like Obama before him, has supported Saudi Arabia's brutal and seemingly pointless air war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, which has continued since 2015, turning Yemen into probably the worst basket case on earth, with no discernible political advantage.

MBS clearly sees that war, like several others, is really against Shi'a Iran, which has undoubtedly provided some help to the Houthis but no serious expert considers the Houthis an Iranian proxy, though their brand of Islam is a variant of mainstream Shi'ism. Then last week, a Houthi missile apparently landed near Riyadh, allegedly manufactured in Iran, which MBS declared an act of war, backed up by Trump. (By that logic, US gun manufacturers should be held liable for the damage and death their products cause, which extension Trump certainly wouldn't approve of).

In June of this year, right after Trump's visit, MBS, in concert with other Gulf states and Egypt, launched a fullscale boycott against Qatar, claiming it supports terrorists. It was immediately clear that their grievance against Qatar, though no democracy itself, rather stemmed from its support of al-

Jazeera and its unflattering coverage of other Arab states, as well as Qatar's independent foreign policy. While Qatar is not a model democracy itself and al-Jazeera has its own biases, it has been invaluable in bringing an infinitely better class of journalism to the Middle East and the rest of the world. Trump immediately tweeted his support for the boycott, though he's since moderated that, belatedly realizing Qatar is itself a major American ally.

Of course, all this has transpired against the background of the apparent defeat of the "Islamic State" (ISIS) and the victory of Bashar Asad's forces, now completely beholden to his allies who enabled his victory in Syria's bloody civil war, namely Hezbollah, Russia and especially Iran (in the latter case "proxy" probably fits.) Hezbollah suffered considerable casualties in Syria, but undoubtedly burnished its reputation, making it that much stronger in its Lebanese home, where it is both an independent (i.e. Iran-influenced) militia and a part of the governing coalition, which presumably leads us back to why the Saudis are disrupting Lebanese politics.

Israel has, of course, been keeping a watchful eye on both Lebanon and Syria, and has even admitted carrying out some bombings in Syria when fighting got too close for comfort, as well as destroying supply caravans headed to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Despite this interdiction, Hezbollah reportedly has now deployed 120,000 missiles aimed at Israel, many apparently with the range to hit Tel Aviv, not to mention Haifa and most of the rest of Israel. Israel of course has its own defensive and offensive capabilities but under these circumstances, if it a war of missiles, it's hard to believe it would escape unscathed, perhaps more so than in any war since 1948. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, [claims that Saudi Arabia is inciting Israel](#) to attack Lebanon, though no evidence has been provided.

President Trump, of course, has played a menacing, if somewhat offstage role in this. He has made Iran his chief bête noir in the Middle East, almost comparable to 'rocket man' Kim Jong Un in Northwest Asia. He has declined to recertify Iran's compliance with the 2015 JCPOA but, characteristically, left it to Congress to decide whether to reimpose sanctions and thus give Iran free reign to move towards a nuclear bomb, though it appears Congress is likely to decline the invitation.

So now it's back to the 1914 analogy when, it is usually agreed, none of the European powers (with the possible exception of Germany) wanted war, but they found themselves in a horrendous one, nevertheless. Similarly, none of the current players seek a war, with the possible exception of MBS and perhaps Trump, both of whom are anxious to burnish their toughness credentials – and neither of whom has accomplished much in their respective short tenures. Trump has the advantage that a Middle East war would probably not directly involve the US, but you can bet he'd be lustily cheering from the sidelines and supplying as many armaments as he could.

Will cooler heads prevail? In this case, unbelievably, the cooler heads (everything is relative) belong to Bibi Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin, the Iranian leadership, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah and, perhaps, other Mideast notables such as Turkey's President Erdogan. None would normally appear on

anyone's list of cooler heads. But here, compared to MBS and Trump, all the others are experienced and, though by no means necessarily adverse to war, probably have a more realistic idea of what war in this context might mean and almost certainly would prefer to avoid it. This is likely in strong contrast to Trump and MBS, neither of whom have any experience with it and don't seem too worried about its prospect.

I personally think there won't be a war at this time, though perhaps that is simply wishful thinking. But it is a striking and discomfiting circumstance to find our safety hostage to the 'cooler' heads of some of the most dangerous men in the world.