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Middle Eastern Monarchs Look at the Trumps and See Themselves

America's Arab allies have always wanted to buy direct access to U.S. foreign policy, and they finally found a seller.

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Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner at the presentation of the Order of Abdulaziz al-Saud medal at the Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh on May 20, 2017. (MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images)

Almost 20 years ago when I was a graduate student living in Cairo, I published an article in a Washington-based journal called *Middle East Insight*. The magazine had a solid reputation, with a knack for scoring interviews with important people. (In the same edition as my piece, titled “Egypt’s Next Generation,” there was an interview with Gamal Mubarak, son of long-term Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had already begun his rise — though not yet his eventual fall — as heir apparent.) A few years later, *Middle East Insight* disappeared. When I heard the news, I figured the magazine was too niche for an expanding media environment, shrugged my shoulders, and went on with life.

I hadn’t thought about *Middle East Insight* until its onetime publisher, George Nader, recently exploded into the news as an international man of mystery at the center of an apparent attempt to covertly influence the outcome of the last American presidential election. It seems that in the span of not quite two decades, the guy who ran a small, likely not profitable, but influential policy magazine become a conduit between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of the Abu Dhabi, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Donald Trump’s closest inner circle, both after, and — crucially for special counsel Robert Mueller’s ongoing criminal investigation — before Trump’s election as U.S. president.

Nader's story is yet another example of the sleaze, greed, and influence-peddling that has come to seem ordinary in Trump-era Washington. But it also offers a view into a more extraordinary and unprecedented problem: a decision by some of America's closest allies in the Middle East to leverage their financial resources in common cause with a bunch of [*ganefs*](#) to influence U.S. foreign policy. It is a problem that can be traced back, in ways that haven't generally been understood, to Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner and his mobile phone.

From the perspective of the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel (there is an Israeli angle to the George Nader story, but it isn't yet entirely clear), and Egypt, there was an entirely rational reason to support Trump's presidential bid and try to influence his approach to the Middle East: They did not like former President Barack Obama's Middle East policy. And while they likely understood that presidential nominee Hillary Clinton was more hawkish than the president she served as secretary of state, the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis were concerned that she would be tethered to the Iran nuclear deal and thus Obama's Iran policy.

They also believed that Clinton would be soft on Islamists. It is an article of faith in Egypt that she enabled the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi in 2011 and 2012. For countries in the Persian Gulf, Egypt provides strategic depth, and "losing" it to the Muslim Brotherhood was a major geopolitical blow. The Israelis, for obvious reasons, were deeply concerned about the accumulation of Islamist political power next door and blamed the Obama administration for abandoning Hosni Mubarak, thereby placing Israel's security in jeopardy.

With Trump, Washington's allies got a candidate and president who referred to the Iran nuclear agreement as the "worst deal ever," surrounded himself with people who either make no distinction between al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood or are simply outright Islamophobes, and has forthrightly declared that the United States supports its friends in the fight against terrorism. Full stop. No caveats, buts, or howevers concerning human rights and the need for political reform. To them, this seemed a lot better than the appreciation of nuance and complexity that was a hallmark of the Obama administration.

Of course, even if an American president shares a given ally's view of the world, diplomacy does not stop. The job of ambassadors, foreign ministers, and other representatives of foreign governments is to keep the United States on their side. Traditionally, this is done through formal discussions with U.S. officials at the State Department, National Security Council, and Department of Defense; meetings with members of Congress; writing op-eds in influential media outlets; and informal channels of influence, notably the Washington social circuit of dinners, embassy garden parties, national day events and the like. No doubt there was a lot of this going on through the first year and half of the Trump administration. But as

we now know, there was an entirely parallel effort to influence American foreign policy, and George Nader was at the center of it.

According to the *New York Times*, Nader and Elliott Broidy [pitched a scheme](#) to the governments of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in which Broidy would use his extensive contacts in Washington, especially in the White House, to shape U.S. policy toward Qatar, which the Saudis and Emiratis accuse of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, funding extremism, and cozying up to Iran. Apparently, the Emiratis agreed to the arrangement. Clearly, putting the screws to Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani is a high priority for the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, who undoubtedly would not apologize for using every method and resource at their disposal to advance their countries' interests. What is the Trump administration's excuse, though?

The kind of influence-peddling in which Nader and Broidy were involved can be traced back to Jared Kushner. On Nov. 8, 2016, if not before, he was handing out his cellphone number to all kinds of people in Washington with little regard for the potential consequences and apparently little idea about who was genuinely powerful and who were just posers. No doubt that important people in certain countries had the mobile numbers of senior members of the Obama administration, plus their Gmail addresses, but there was something qualitatively different about the way Kushner was operating. He was essentially opening the door to a Trumpian culture in which there is no process, there is no vetting, everyone and anyone could be an asset, loyalty is the greatest quality second only to money, and there are always ways to get something done no matter what.

Trump's world does not operate the same way as Washington's major Middle Eastern allies, but there are some parallels that make stories like the George Nader affair possible. Trump's tendency to eschew the formal processes and procedures of government dovetails with the way in informal power, uncoded norms, and past practices shape governance and policy in places as diverse as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Israel. These kinds of informal institutions exist in the United States as well; a lot of things have gotten done in Washington over the years because of the Harvard "old boys" network or because that's the way it has always been done in the cloakroom. But informal networking has generally not guided the realm of foreign policy, which has always involved an exhaustive (and exhausting) interagency process. Kushner's willingness to hand out his digits signaled that Team Trump was open to doing things significantly differently from previous administrations, and U.S. allies along with people like Nader and Broidy took him up on it. The result was a \$650 million contract for Broidy's security firm after he bent the ear of the president and others about the perfidy of the Qatari leadership.

From the vantage point of Middle Eastern capitals, in Trump's Washington, the secretary of state and the national security advisor are superfluous. You could go through Kushner or supplement by engaging in some "riyalpolitik." The influence business has been around

Washington for a long time. The amount of money that foreign governments expend on D.C. lobbying is staggering, but the Nader-Broidy scheme was an attempt to sell American foreign policy — which, as Mueller will soon remind everyone lest anyone in Trump's orbit forget, is different from selling real estate.

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