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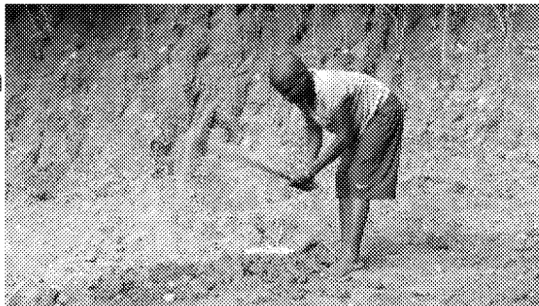
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The Atlantic Council's questionable relationship with Gabon's leader

BY THOR HALVORSSSEN AND ALEX GLADSTEIN, CONTRIBUTORS - 10/26/16 7:21 PM ET

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promote the agendas of the world's most repressive regimes in exchange for cash. To hide human rights abuses, Equatorial Guinea's strongman hired Qorvis; the pre-revolutionary Tunisian regime hired Washington Media Group and the Saudis hired Edelman. There are plenty of suitors for foreign autocrats looking to whitewash their reputations on Capitol Hill.

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Some organizations are more subtle in their relationships with foreign governments. The Atlantic Council is a DC-based policy group with a stated mission of providing "an essential forum for navigating the dramatic economic and

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...erning and governing the uniquely influential network of global leaders." The Council boasts heavyweights like Brent Scowcroft and Joseph Nye on its board, arranges appearances by Secretary of State John Kerry and

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numerous world figures at its events, and promises intellectual independence. But given the recent behavior of the Council and its president, Frederick Kempe, it appears that the organization is using its legitimacy as a veil to hide a whitewashing operation just as morally bankrupt as any public relations firm in Washington, D.C.

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{mosads}Questions began to surface about the Council's integrity in 2012, when the organization threw a praise party for Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime.

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Concerns were raised over the fact that Alexander Mirtchev, a Bulgarian-born fixer who "consults" for the regime, was (and still is) on the Atlantic Council's board of directors and executive committee. External pressure eventually forced the Council to reveal that its major donors included police states like Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia. In August 2016 the New York Times

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reported that the Atlantic Council “has seen its annual revenue grow to \$21 million from \$2 million in the last decade” by offering “access to United States and foreign government officials in exchange for contributions.”

Today, human rights abusing regimes in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates top the Council's public donor list, and continue to be the beneficiaries of the organization's public relations spin. For example, despite a brutal five-year crackdown on pro-democracy activists, the Council would have us believe that “no country in the Gulf region and perhaps in the broader Arab world has thought about and experimented with reform more than the Kingdom of Bahrain.”

The Atlantic Council's latest dalliance with a dictator unfolded this summer when Frederick Kempe and his staff decided to bestow a “Global

Citizen Award” on the dictator of Gabon, Ali Bongo Mbonimpa. The autocrat—known for his outlandish corruption and violent crackdowns on dissidents—was to be honored for “his life of public service and efforts to improve the lives of the people of Gabon.” The shiny language stood in stark contrast to the reality on the ground, which became darker last month when Bongo stole an election to keep himself in power.

Despite opposition deaths and international outcry, he remained on track to receive his award at the Atlantic Council’s New York gala on Sept. 19, alongside the Prime Ministers of Italy and Japan.

Human Rights Foundation issued a public statement condemning the Atlantic Council for celebrating Bongo despite his human rights violations, election fraud, and kleptocracy. Hours later, Kempe’s staff announced that

Bongo would no longer be coming to New York to collect the award due to “overriding priorities he has in his country” —a euphemism for the repression of public protests.

It may be very convenient for Kempe that Bongo did not collect his prize. However, non-attendance does not magically exonerate Kempe and his colleagues for choosing to exalt a dictator who, along with his father, has harshly ruled Gabon and siphoned off so much of the country's natural resource wealth that he has become the poster boy for African corruption.

Wanting to understand exactly why the Atlantic Council chose Bongo in the first place, HRF set about drafting an argument for Foreign Policy. We wrote to Kempe on Sept. 13 to address the likelihood that there was “pay to play” involved in the selection of the award recipient. On Sept. 17, Kempe finally responded and

agreed that he would discuss the matter by telephone. We replied, asking him if he could speak to us on Sept. 19.

Kempe asked to push the conversation off until the end of the week. He assured us that the Atlantic Council hadn't received money from Gabon or from "agents of the government."

We wrote back: "Has Richard Attias donated to the Atlantic Council? Has Mostafa Terrab? Have others with business interests in Gabon? Who proposed Ali Bongo for the award? On what basis did the selection committee believe he qualified, let alone deserved, the award? Will you rescind the award? I believe answering these questions will accomplish a great deal. They are crucial to an understanding of how Ali Bongo comes to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Japanese and Italian government heads in being honored by a civil society

organization from Washington.”

Kempe ignored all of these questions. Meanwhile, he and his staff shamelessly wiped Bongo clean from the gala program and proceeded with event planning, hoping to dodge responsibility for the award. We published our argument in *Foreign Policy* on Sept. 19, the day of the award ceremony. The article was widely shared and some at the dinner discussed Bongo and even brought the situation up with Kempe.

That night Thor Halvorssen's email inbox was the target of Kempe's ire. He was angrier than a monarch gone mad: “You are perhaps the most irresponsible person who has ever sent me an email. I have no intention of ever answering another one again.” Within an hour, and with no prompting, he again wrote: “You are unhinged and you need help. Not from me. But let's leave that aside. I don't have those

psychiatric skills. But you do seem to be a total whack job.” He then proceeded to say that he had consulted his attorneys, that HRF’s article was “actionable,” that we had caused “measurable” damage, and crowned it with “We should be allies, given what you profess to care about. But clearly you are driven by money interests that prompt you in a different direction...”

Not satisfied with ad hominem attacks and legal threats, on Sept. 30 Kempe penned a rebuttal in Foreign Policy called “The Atlantic Council Did Not Give A Global Citizen Award To Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba.” The title is a farce, given that Council publicly stated that they “would not rescind Mr Bongo’s award.” Beyond the mendacious headline, the article showed an extraordinary amount of bad faith. Kempe claimed that the Atlantic Council “received no contribution from any

corporate or individual funder with investments or interests in Gabon in relationship to this award notation or any work we do in Gabon.”

Seldom has so much unashamed dishonesty fit into one sentence. Richard Attias's firm is disclosed as a major Atlantic Council donor while at the same time he works as a paid PR shark for the Gabonese dictatorship. Attias organizes a propaganda event in Gabon called the “New York Forum Africa,” which functions as both a photo opportunity for Bongo and a place for lucrative deals to get done with the Gabonese state.

Attias boasted that “600 million euros worth of partnership contracts and project agreements were signed” at the 2013 event, and that “more than EUR 2 billion of new investment and thousands of jobs have been created through private-public deals signed at the NYFA” in 2014 and 2015. According to

firsthand accounts, the “sycophantic praising of the Bongos” at these events is incessant.

Even if the money that Attias donates to the Atlantic Council is not internally earmarked for Gabon work, should that matter? Attias’s job is to make Bongo look good internationally. The idea that Council staff came up with the idea to give a corrupt dictator a “Global Citizen Award” with no influence from Attias or others with Gabon interests is risible. And the idea that this money does not color the Atlantic Council’s incredibly rosy viewpoint of Gabon beggars belief.

But Kempe knows his way around public relations, and even managed to mislead Politico, which reported that he said that the Council “doesn’t have any financial relationship with the government or its agents”—an outright falsehood. And Attias isn’t the only Council donor

that acts as an agent of Bongo. Joseph J. Szlavik (donating to the Council as “Scribe Strategies and Advisors”) had his home in Pennsylvania raided by federal agents after transporting “bulk cash” for Bongo into the United States without declaring the transactions. Despite what Kempe would like his readers to believe, these are just two of several donors with strong ties to the Bongo family.

Kempe dedicates the second half of his article to convincing the reader that Bongo isn't really all that bad. He tells us that “fair-minded individuals can differ” on “Bongo's suitability for international recognition,” and praises Bongo's “considerable progress” and “commitment to conservation.” When asked if these green initiatives were real, local environmental activist and Goldman Prize Laureate Marc Ona Essangui told HRF that elephant

poaching and illegal timber logging have actually increased since Bongo took power. Essangui said that ivory traffickers enjoy total impunity, and that Bongo has been selling off forest land to palm oil companies like Olam, fully knowing that the deals would devastate biodiversity. Essangui called the Atlantic Council's support for Bongo "a nightmare for the people of Gabon," and said the award served as fluff to promote the dictator's international image while covering up corruption and human rights abuses. It's surprising that an "expert" like Fred Kempe buys and sells Bongo's narrative, and disappointing that he does so while Attias and others with Gabonese interests donate to his organization.

Beyond Gabon, it must be noted that the most despicable work done by the Atlantic Council is on behalf of the Eritrean regime. Known as the "North Korea of Africa,"

Eritrea has been ruled for decades by the dictator Isaias Afwerki. He exerts tight and brutal control of his people and exiles dissidents to island prisons in the middle of the Red Sea. The United Nations has recently accused him of crimes against humanity, detailing in particular his methods of enslavement, rape, and torture.

But Atlantic Council deputy Africa director Bronwyn Bruton wrote in the New York Times in June 2016 that “it’s bad in Eritrea, but not that bad.” The article—merely the latest in a long line of whitewashing—downplays the abuses of the dictatorship, argues that the U.N. should not sanction the regime, and makes the case for engagement. Here the Atlantic Council is taking a brazen stand for a regime that can only be described as a malevolent force for evil. And nowhere in the article do they disclose that Canada’s Nevsun

Resources, with extensive mining interests in Eritrea, a six-figure Atlantic Council donor.

In Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "A Visit From the Goon Squad," a character by the name of Dolly Peale goes through a personal crisis while doing public relations work for a genocidal dictator. Her expertise is in massaging reporters to produce better headlines for her client. One, "Extent Of B's War Crimes May Be Exaggerated, New Evidence Shows," could be straight out of the Atlantic Council's playbook when read in parallel with Bronwyn Bruton's Eritrea commentary. In the end, Peale almost sides with her morals when she personally visits one of her client's mass graves, but ends up being bought off with hush money.

It's fair to wonder how Kempe and his staff can look at themselves in the mirror every morning when they spend

their days defending dictators like Eritrea's Afwerki, Gabon's Bongo, and Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev. The donations might be juicy, but at some point, Kempe's colleagues and prestigious board members must stop and realize that they are taking the side of tyrants, betraying the very ideals they set out to promote in the first place.

*Halvorssen is president and CEO of Human Rights Foundation, and founder of the Oslo Freedom Forum. His writing on human rights and corruption has been featured in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *TIME*, and you can find him on Twitter at @ThorHalvorssen. Gladstein is HRF's chief strategy officer, and his writing has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, and *Foreign Policy* – you can find him on Twitter at @Gladstein.*

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