

Annotations to “Donald Trump’s Worst Deal” By Adam Davidson

What follows divides the the article into sections and describes what each section does. The author interviews participants in the project plus legal, financial, and other experts. He also visits the site and talks to local residents, taxi drivers, politicians and contractors. He draws connections between actors, asks questions, and reports answers. When people say contradictory things, for the most part he simply reports what they say and lets the reader draw conclusions. There is no thesis, but the conclusion that most readers will draw is that the Trump Organization, while perhaps not corrupt in itself, is unusually careless about who they are dealing with, what they are connected to, and where the money is coming from.

- A) The first three paragraphs describe the road from the airport to the city, the buildings along it, and the Trump hotel looming at the end of it. Taxis are the common way to get to a hotel, but Baku taxi drivers don’t know how to get there. These are physical connections and disconnections. The “Trump” sign on the tower clearly connects it to the Trump organization.
- B) Paragraphs 4-6 are about the timing of the project, the location, and some general principles about assessing the viability of a hotel project, bringing in expert opinion. Note that the author is not arguing that the hotel was a bad idea. He is assembling facts and experts, combining them with his own descriptions, and letting the information speak for itself.
- C) Paragraphs 7-10 are about the people involved in the project, including local politicians and businessmen, architects and architectural firms, and the Trump organization. There are some conflicting statements, but the author does not highlight them.
- D) Paragraphs 11-14 are about contradictions between statements about the degree of involvement of the Trump organization in the hotel, ranging from just licensing the name to being closely involved with every detail.
- E) Paragraphs 15-17 are about the legal significance of the apparently intense involvement of the Trump organization in the project, even though a Trump Organization legal officer, Alan Garten, claimed that the Trump organization had severed all ties with the project.
- F) Paragraphs 18-20 explore relationships between the Mammadov family, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and the Trump organization and whether any of these relationships broke the law. Note that the author says that there is no evidence that Trump or his employees “actively” engaged in illegal behavior.
- G) Paragraphs 21-15 report on a conversation with an expert who helps companies avoid the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (F.C.P.A.) who describes another businessman who was prosecuted for paying bribes in Azerbaijan.
- H) Paragraphs 26-30 describe the fortune of Anar Mammadov, the companies he owns, their connections to the government, and how he became so powerful.

- I) Paragraphs 31-34 are about the construction of the project, which required that many private homes be demolished, and how contractors were paid, often with bags of cash. The author describes some of the behavior as seeming, “nakedly corrupt.”
- J) Paragraphs 35-38 are about whether or not there was corruption in the Baku Trump tower project, whether the Trump organization knew about it, and definitions of corruption under the F.C.P.A., relying on experts and people involved in the project.
- K) Paragraphs 39-41 quote President Trump complaining about the F.C.P.A., calling it a “horrible law” because it prevents American companies from doing deals. The author says it is “unclear” what the Trump administration will do about the law, but notes that prosecution under the law has increased sharply after 9/11.
- L) Paragraphs 42-44 explore links between the Mammadov family in Azerbaijan and the Darvishi family in Iran, who are associated with the Revolutionary Guard.
- M) Paragraphs 45-48 describe the role of the Revolutionary Guard and its businesses and front organizations in Iran and in the region.
- N) Paragraphs 49-51 describe the Trump organization’s denial of knowledge of the connections between the Mammadovs and the Revolutionary Guard. The author then quotes experts who say that a report on these connections would take only a couple of days and that because the U.S. has sanctions on Iran, most firms would avoid dealing with any organization possibly connected to Iran.
- O) Paragraphs 52-55 explore possible motivations for the Mammadovs to work with the Revolutionary Guard. A front company for the Guard was hired to build roads that cost \$18 million per kilometer after an American company was told that its offer of \$6 million per kilometer was too expensive.
- P) Paragraphs 56-60 introduce the concept of money laundering as a possible motivation (“money launderers love construction projects”) and explore various large construction projects, including the Trump Baku Tower, undertaken by the Mammadovs, who also apparently spent lavishly on themselves during this time. Queries to the construction company, the Iranians, the Azerbaijan government, the Mammadovs, the Department of Justice, and the White House went unanswered.
- Q) Paragraphs 62-65 explore why the Trump organization did not cancel the project when it learned in 2015 that the Revolutionary Guard was probably involved. They said they had a binding contract. (Earlier they said they had cut all ties.) An expert is quoted as saying that you can’t violate sanctions just because you have a contract.
- R) Paragraphs 66-70 explore other deals made by the Trump Organization that have been involved in money laundering and bribery scandals. Many questions remain unanswered.
- S) Paragraphs 71-78 conclude the piece by summarizing the current state of affairs.

The last paragraph draws some conclusions, but not in the author’s voice:

“More than a dozen lawyers with experience in F.C.P.A. prosecution expressed surprise at the Trump Organization’s seemingly lax approach to vetting its foreign partners. But, when I asked a former Trump Organization executive if the Baku deal had seemed unusual, he laughed. ‘No deal there seems unusual, as long as a check is attached,’ he said.”