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Reset Overdue: Remaking U.S.—Saudi Relations

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- The U.S.—Saudi relationship is long overdue for a reset: The U.S. should push Saudi Arabia to engage productively with the region rather than tolerating policies that undermine stability.
- Specifically, the U.S. should pressure Saudi Arabia to end the war on Yemen, end the blockade of Qatar, participate in the development of an inclusive regional security architecture, and respect the sovereignty of other countries and the human rights of Saudi citizens.
- To encourage Saudi Arabia to adopt these policies, the U.S. should be prepared to support and invest in Saudi economic diversification and support the development of Saudi nuclear energy. If Saudi Arabia does not respond to these incentives, the U.S. should end all weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and seek other regional partners.

The U.S.—Saudi relationship has long been problematic. Although historically justified by U.S. oil dependence and the need for a reliable supplier, Saudi Arabia no longer provides the U.S. with significant oil and is no longer a source of regional stability. Saudi Arabia continues to fund terrorist organizations abroad, despite stated efforts by the Saudi government to curtail such spending after 9/11.¹ Under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has destabilized the region by waging war on Yemen, blockading Qatar, kidnapping the prime minister of Lebanon to force him to resign, and forcibly silencing Saudi citizens at home and abroad. At the same time, U.S. imports of Saudi oil have fallen nearly to zero, raising the question of why Washington continues to support a deeply authoritarian regime that acts contrary to U.S. interests by fomenting violence and instability.²

¹ "Saudi Arabia's Measures to Fight Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism and Proliferation." Mutual Evaluation Report. Financial Action Task Force. September 2018. <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/mutualevaluations/documents/mer-saudi-arabia-2018.html>

² Wingfield, Brian, and Javier Bas. "Saudi Oil Exports to U.S. Plunge To Lowest Level in 35 Years." Bloomberg News. June 16, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-16/saudi-oil-exports-to-u-s-plunge-toward-lowest-level-in-35-years>



Until recently, Washington has lacked the strategic options necessary to push back against Riyadh’s troubling policies. This maneuverability has grown significantly in recent years as the Middle East’s strategic significance has declined in proportion to America’s dependence on Persian Gulf oil. These new circumstances create an opportunity to reset relations with the House of Saud. Yet U.S. policy remains effectively on autopilot, as demonstrated by the failure of the U.S. government to respond to the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist and U.S. resident, in the two years since MBS is believed to have ordered his brutal murder. Given its new maneuverability, Washington should push Riyadh to adopt a more constructive role in the region. If it is unwilling to do so, the U.S. should be prepared to significantly alter the terms of the U.S.—Saudi relationship.

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For its part, Saudi Arabia has expressed a desire for greater autonomy and a broader leadership role on the global stage. In his ambitious plan for the future, “Vision 2030,” MBS declares that Saudi Arabia should embrace technological innovation, diversify its economy away from fossil fuels, and relax strict laws and norms enforcing gender segregation, among other goals.³

The United States should encourage the Saudi leadership to continue transforming its economy and allow genuine social freedoms. But these steps alone are insufficient. The U.S. should also insist that Saudi Arabia no longer pursue policies that destabilize the region. To secure Riyadh’s cooperation, the U.S. must be prepared to offer adequate incentives — and to impose costs to encourage Saudi Arabia to contribute to greater stability for itself and its neighbors.

To this end, the U.S. should ask the kingdom to adopt the following foreign policies, as elaborated below:

- end the war on Yemen;
- end the blockade of Qatar;
- end all support for extremist organizations;
- support the development of an inclusive regional security architecture;
- respect the sovereignty of other countries;
- ensure the human rights of Saudi citizens.

If Saudi Arabia adopts these policies, the U.S. should help the kingdom achieve the goals established in “Vision 2030,” including by investing in efforts to diversify the Saudi economy. U.S. support should focus on green technology, tourism, and the development of nuclear energy for the purpose of regional desalination — two areas that are also consistent with Vision 2030 and Saudi leadership in the G-20. If the Saudi government refuses to modify its policies, the U.S. should end all weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, while expanding outreach to more cooperative Persian Gulf partners.

Ending the war on Yemen

Saudi Arabia commenced military operations in Yemen in 2015, aiming to break the power of the Houthi movement. The Saudis justified the campaign as a defensive effort to block Iran from penetrating the Arabian Peninsula and challenging Saudi control. Saudi Arabia’s most important coalition partner, the United

³ “Vision 2030.” English language website. <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>



Arab Emirates, withdrew from the conflict in late 2019, conscious of the growing financial and reputational cost of continued participation. Saudi Arabia continues to bombard Yemen, with an average of 12 airstrikes per day.⁴

The weapons platforms and munitions the Saudis use in Yemen have been supplied primarily by the United States. A combination of poor training, disregard for the rules of war, and sheer carelessness have caused thousands of noncombatant Yemeni casualties. Civilian targets include schools, hospitals, public utilities, and other nonmilitary public and private facilities. Saudi munitions are either of indiscriminate effect or precision-guided, yet because the targeting process fails to distinguish which targets are permitted under the rules of war, the use of precision munitions has not limited collateral damage. Targeted attacks have killed more than 13,500 civilians. Human rights observers assert that a significant number of Saudi attacks meet the criteria of war crimes, and U.S. officials who administer arms transfers to Saudi Arabia now fear the possibility of prosecution by the International Criminal Court.⁵

The Trump administration continues to justify U.S. complicity in human rights violations on two grounds. The president has asserted that the revenue from the sale of weapons and munitions to Saudi Arabia is in the U.S. economic interest. Second, lower-level bureaucrats assert that Saudi reliance on U.S. weapons will lead the Saudi military to heed U.S. guidance regarding the appropriate use of force.

In reality, U.S. cooperation with Saudi operations in Yemen has produced no discernable change in Saudi targeting practices. The State Department, according to its inspector general, has deliberately concealed the fact that the department has skirted its legal responsibility to account for the effect on civilian populations of the transfer of U.S. weapons to combatants in the Yemen war.⁶ Congress, which can block arms sales, has been cut out of the loop by the Trump administration's controversial use of an emergency declaration to unilaterally transfer weapons over congressional objections. In fact, there would be no "emergency" threat to U.S. interests, were the Saudis' ability to kill Yemeni civilians to be constrained by a shortage of munitions.

Clearly, the Trump administration will resist arguments that pressing Saudi Arabia to cease operations in Yemeni airspace will protect U.S. reputational interests as well as noncombatant Yemeni lives. In contrast, Joe Biden's presidential campaign has said Biden would halt supplies that enable Saudi forces to wreak havoc in Yemen. The U.S. government should press the kingdom to agree to end hostilities and participate constructively in ongoing negotiations regarding the future participants in Yemen's government and the role of outside players. The Saudis perceive a threat from Yemen and, although they misjudge the nature of the Iran–Houthi relationship, it has included weapons transfers that could hurt the kingdom.⁷ The bombardment of Yemen has not mitigated this threat. As a first step, Saudi air strikes and U.S. support for them must end. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia should instead support a political process to address domestic conflicts among Yemeni actors.

⁴ "Yemen: Events of 2019." World Report 2020: Country chapter for Yemen. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen#>

⁵ LaForgia, Michael, and Edward Wong. "War Crime Risk Grows for U.S. Over Saudi Strikes in Yemen." The New York Times. September 14, 2020. Updated September 16, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/us/politics/us-war-crimes-yemen-saudi-arabia.html>

⁶ Wong, Edward. "U.S. Rationale for Military Aid to Saudis in Yemen War is Fraying." The New York Times. September 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/us/politics/yemen-us-weapons-saudi-arabia.html>

⁷ "U.N. Report: Houthi Arms Resemble Iran's." Iran Primer. USIP. February 14, 2020. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/feb/14/un-report-houthi-arms-resemble-irans>



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Ending the blockade of Qatar

Although the blockade of Qatar is carried out primarily by Saudi Arabia — which controls Qatar’s only land border, at Abu Samra, and prevents Qatari planes from accessing Saudi airspace — Emirati antipathy toward Qatar is a crucial factor in sustaining the blockade. The blockade followed the Emiratis’ and Saudis’ successful manipulation of the Trump White House in early 2017, when the Trump administration turned against Qatar, a U.S. security partner in the Persian Gulf and the host of Al Udeid Air Base, the largest U.S. military facility in the region. Statements from White House officials at the time, as well as Trump’s tweets, reflected the Emirati–Saudi narrative that Qatar was a sponsor of extremism.⁸ This explains why the U.S. did not prevent the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt from cutting diplomatic, economic, and political relations with Qatar on June 5, 2017.

⁸ Coates Ulrichsen, Kristian. *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*. London. Hurst & Co, 2020.

⁹ Al–Jaber, Khaled, and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. “Is There a Future for the GCC?” *Responsible Statecraft*. June 15, 2020. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/06/15/is-there-a-future-for-the-gcc/>

¹⁰ Bruno, Alessandro. “The COVID19 Created Opportunities for Re-engagement Within the GCC.” *Gulf International Forum*. September 14, 2020. <https://gulff.org/the-covid19-created-opportunities-for-re-engagement-within-the-gcc/>

¹¹ Coates Ulrichsen, Kristian. *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*. London. Hurst & Co, 2020.

Although initially blindsided by the blockade, Qatar refused to comply with the 13 demands issued by the blockading states. These included ending diplomatic engagement with Iran, declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, and shutting down the Al–Jazeera news network. Qatar has managed to survive and even thrive with the help of Oman, Kuwait, and Turkey.⁹ Qatar left OPEC and has maintained its position as the world’s largest exporter of liquified natural gas. The embargo also incentivized Qatar to achieve greater self-sufficiency by reducing imports and increasing domestic food production.¹⁰ Despite the intra–Arab dispute, the conflict has not affected U.S. access to shared military installations in Qatar. After initially supporting the blockade, the White House gradually reversed positions, and by September 2017, Trump supported an end to the Gulf crisis.

In effect, Riyadh is now stuck between U.S. pressure to end the blockade and pressure from Abu Dhabi to continue it. Of the two, the Saudi leadership considers the UAE to be a more reliable partner than the U.S., especially given the prospect of a possible Biden administration. For this reason, Mohammed bin Salman is likely to follow the UAE’s preferences and continue the blockade. The U.S. will therefore need to apply sufficient pressure and/or provide adequate incentives for the Saudis to overcome Emirati resistance to ending the Gulf crisis.¹¹

The blockade of Qatar and the war in Yemen are both self-evident failures. Because he staked his reputation on successfully transforming Saudi Arabia according to “Vision 2030,” with conditional support for these goals from the U.S., MBS may be ready to cut his losses in Yemen and Qatar and refocus attention on more constructive initiatives.



Developing an inclusive regional security architecture

The Middle East is characterized by a multipolar balance of power wherein regional rivals deter or hold in check the aggressive inclinations of other regional actors. The U.S. is well served by this multipolarity, which prevents the emergence of a regional hegemon and should allow the U.S. to reduce its military footprint in the region. However, multipolarity in the absence of a regional security architecture risks perpetuating instability.¹² Although Saudi Arabia would likely prefer the United States to continue to act as the regional security guarantor, its next best option is to take the lead in developing a security architecture that addresses Saudi concerns.

The “Saudi first” impulse can be rechanneled toward a noninterventionist foreign policy, which would reduce the resources the kingdom sends abroad and so prioritize the well-being of Saudi citizens.

Since 1981, the United States has tried, with minimal success, to push the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council to develop more integrated and interoperable military capabilities. One of the chief obstacles to successful security integration is that the U.S. itself has not committed to work with all states in the region, most notably Iran. A functioning multilateral security forum dedicated to building rather than burning bridges to Iran would provide a framework for the United States to maintain a better equilibrium in its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran, to shift more responsibility for solving the region’s problems to local states, and to encourage them to bear more of the burden of promoting peace, security, and cooperation in the region.

Should the U.S. government decide to test the waters with the Saudis on the creation of a new regional security forum, it should offer to lay out preliminary U.S. thinking as the basis for exploratory discussions. However, the U.S. needs to resist the temptation to lead this effort, which would arouse Iranian suspicions and make it more difficult to achieve regional buy-in. While the leaders of Iran, Bahrain, and the UAE have at one time or another expressed an interest in a new regional security forum — and while Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait have reasonably good relations with Tehran — Saudi participation is crucial for ensuring regional buy-in, as well as Iranian interest.

The U.S. should proceed slowly and cautiously as it attempts to gain traction with the Saudis. A practical first step would be to secure Saudi buy-in to launch a “track 1.5” dialogue bringing together technical experts from the Gulf states and Iran at government and nongovernmental levels to discuss less controversial and more technical, transnational issues that affect the security and prosperity of all these countries and that cannot be resolved without cross-border cooperation.

¹² Pillar, Paul, Andrew Bacevich, Annelie Sheline, and Trita Parsi. “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination.” The Quincy Institute. Paper No. 2. July 17, 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>



Good timing and the right context can often determine diplomatic success or failure. The U.S. will need to be agile in looking for an opening to broach this with the Saudis. The optimal time might be after Washington has signaled its intent to adopt a more conciliatory policy toward Iran.¹³

The U.S. should leave it up to Riyadh to craft a diplomatic strategy for engaging the Iranians and Iran's Gulf partners to get exploratory discussions off the ground. The U.S. should nonetheless insist that the Saudis help create a more receptive climate in Tehran by dialing down their demonization of Iran.

A campaign of "maximum pressure" waged against Iran by Washington and Riyadh is incompatible with securing Tehran's support for a new forum. By the same token, the United States cannot credibly argue to the Saudis that they should adopt a more conciliatory policy toward Iran if the United States is not also prepared to embrace reconciliation with the Iranians. In short, there would need to be major changes in the political relationships among all three parties to have any chance of launching a new regional security forum. Because these relationships are so politically fraught, there might be value for both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to open bilateral back channels with Iran to determine whether there is a basis for more formal talks about establishing the new forum.

Respecting the sovereignty of other countries and the human rights of Saudi citizens

Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy blunders reflect the overt expression of what was previously a more subtle approach to foreign intervention. For half a century, Saudi Arabia has used its oil wealth to expand its economic, media, and religious influence abroad.

The death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, followed by Saudi Arabia's 1970s oil boom, as well as Egypt's peace agreement with Israel and its subsequent boycott by the Arab League, allowed Saudi Arabia to eclipse Egypt as a regional leader. Saudi Arabia purchased the loyalty of governments in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Sudan, while expanding the scope of its religious outreach by funding Islamic centers and schools throughout the world.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia's expansionist religious policy shaped global Islam in the image of Wahhabism for the purpose of legitimizing the rule of the House of Saud and its control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.¹⁵ Yet the spread of Wahhabism, a highly conservative interpretation of Islam based on eighteenth-century teachings, normalized religious intolerance and inspired certain groups to embrace violent jihad against perceived enemies of Islam.

The events of 9/11 caused the Saudi government to reassess the character of the global influence its petrodollars had purchased. The potential damage to the U.S.—Saudi relationship caused by the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi prompted the government to extend greater surveillance over the flow of Islamic charitable giving that sometimes funded jihadi movements, including al-Qaeda. Saudi Arabia suffered a string of domestic terrorist attacks from 2003 to 2006, precipitating a significantly more robust counterterrorism partnership with the United States. Saudi Arabia continued to fund governments abroad, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Bahrain, to protect these autocratic regimes in the face of domestic dissent, especially after the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Although Saudi Arabia cracked down on the ability of terrorist groups to operate domestically, it continued to fund religious institutions promoting Wahhabism abroad, while also funding terrorist organizations in the Syrian

¹³ Pillar, Paul, Andrew Bacevich, Annelle Sheline, Trita Parsi. "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination." The Quincy Institute. Paper No. 2. July 17, 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>

¹⁴ Shehabi, Saeed. "The Role of Religious Ideology." Madawi al-Rasheed, ed. Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers. London. Hurst Publishers. 2008.

¹⁵ Al-Rasheed, Madawi. "An Assessment of Saudi Political, Religious, and Media Expansion." Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers. London. Hurst Publishers. 2008.



civil war, supporting groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham since 2016) against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.¹⁶

Yet, as the Saudi budget has grown tighter due to low oil prices, citizens have grown discontented that wealth is sent abroad rather than spent domestically, a sentiment expressed in the social media hashtag, “Saudi first.”¹⁷ The rising salience of Saudi nationalism is partly the result of a 1990s-era policy to cultivate it in schools.¹⁸ After 9/11, Saudi nationalism received additional emphasis; by 2005, King Abdullah inaugurated the celebration of Saudi National Day, over the objections of religious scholars who saw the holiday as a Western import.¹⁹ Upon taking power, MBS harnessed Saudi nationalism in support of his assertively interventionist foreign policy, stoking it for his war on Yemen and invoking it against Qatar. But the “Saudi first” impulse can be rechanneled toward a noninterventionist foreign policy, which would reduce the resources the kingdom sends abroad and so prioritize the well-being of Saudi citizens.

Instead, the Saudi government imposed taxes on citizens for the first time in January 2018. The government then tripled value-added taxes to 15 percent last July. In a poll conducted in August 2020, 61 percent of respondents said the VAT increase had a “severe impact” on their finances.²⁰ This has sharpened contradictions between the Saudis’ foreign and domestic policies. Having learned that militarism abroad proves costly to his nation’s wealth and his international reputation, Mohammed bin Salman may be ready to focus on keeping his promises to his people.

“Vision 2030” defines Saudi leadership in economic and technological terms. As the year 2030 draws closer, the Saudi public may begin to demand improved outcomes, despite the austerity necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The U.S. can help support the goals of “Vision 2030” by encouraging and investing in Saudi efforts to diversify its economy and to participate in fora promoting international cooperation. If Saudi Arabia continues to violate other nations’ sovereignty, especially by funding extremist groups, waging war, or fomenting rebellion, the U.S. should be prepared to increase pressure on the Saudis. The U.S. would be a more credible enforcer if it, too, stopped violating other nations’ sovereignty.

The current U.S. relationship to Saudi Arabia undermines U.S. interests, including its own democracy.

Relatedly, the U.S. is in no position to dictate that another country respect its citizens’ human rights so long as the rights of U.S. citizens are regularly violated. The U.S. should strive to lead by example and uphold Americans’ rights. Yet the approach of the Trump

¹⁶ Sengupta, Kim. “Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist Extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria.” *The Independent*. May 13, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html>

¹⁷ Alhusein, Eman. “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia.” *The European Council of Foreign Relations*. June 19, 2019. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia

¹⁸ Haykel, Bernard, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stephane Lacroix, eds. *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic, and Religious Change*. New York. Cambridge University Press. 2015.

¹⁹ Murphy, Caryle. “Saudi Arabia Celebrates Its National Day.” *The National*. September 23, 2005. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/saudi-celebrates-its-national-day-1.546761>

²⁰ Zafar, Shah. “A Vast Majority of Public in Saudi Arabia Claim the New VAT Rate Has Affected their Finances.” *YouGov*. September 1, 2020. <https://mena.yougov.com/en/news/2020/09/01/vast-majority-public-saudi-arabia-claim-new-vat-ra/>



administration, which fails to acknowledge the Saudi government's role in the murder of Saudi citizens and blocked congressional efforts to end all arms sales to Saudi Arabia following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, represents the antithesis of the United States' professed commitment to human rights. The current U.S. relationship to Saudi Arabia undermines U.S. interests, including its own democracy.

Proposed shifts in U.S. policy

The policy shifts outlined above are those that Saudi Arabia needs to adopt to maintain a strong working relationship with the United States. To encourage these desired outcomes, the U.S. should be prepared to offer incentives and disincentives for Saudi Arabia to adopt more constructive policies.

Incentive: Support and invest in economic diversification

Although his aggressive impulses have been largely counterproductive in Saudi foreign policy, the silver lining of Mohammed bin Salman's consolidation of power is his potential ability to unilaterally alter the Saudi economy. The scale of the transformation outlined in "Vision 2030" would have been nearly impossible under the historical model of governing by consensus among various powerful branches of the Al Saud family.²¹ "Vision 2030" may yet prove too ambitious, especially with persistently low oil prices. The break-even price for Saudi Arabia to address existing budgetary needs is \$80 a barrel. At writing, the price stands at around \$40 per barrel. MBS' more expensive desires, such as building the futuristic city of Neom, may need to be sacrificed to the more urgent objective of developing an economy that can employ Saudi Arabia's young and growing

population. His pattern of behavior has not indicated a willingness to make these necessary sacrifices.

Saudi Arabia has long declared its intention to end its dependence on fossil fuels. Like the other oil-rich Gulf countries, the rentier state model becomes increasingly expensive as the population expands at a rate that exceeds the value of the state's resource wealth. Yet rentier states tend to struggle to overcome their economic dependence on natural resources for multiple reasons, one of which is political. By controlling the natural resource, the government controls wealth and therefore power, whereas a stronger private sector would undermine the state's central economic role. In Saudi Arabia, a country created when tribes from the central highland region of Najd conquered the surrounding territories and imposed their puritanical interpretation of Islam, the centralization of wealth and power helped to guarantee the territorial integrity of the country.²² Diversifying the economy might empower these conquered regions to regain autonomy or even pursue separatist agendas.

For these reasons, related to both MBS's personality and to the structural conditions he faces, U.S. encouragement for his stated commitment to economic diversification could be transformational. As MBS declares his intention to revolutionize the economy and society, the U.S. can reinforce this trajectory with investments, statements of support, and technology sharing. But the U.S. should offer material assistance for economic diversification only if Saudi Arabia ceases to interfere in other countries and begins developing a regional security architecture. If these conditions are met, the U.S. can serve its own interest in combating climate change by supporting Saudi Arabia as it transitions away from fossil fuel dependence while also expanding the U.S.—Saudi relationship beyond the narrow military sphere.

²¹ Yizraeli, Sarah. *Politics and Society in Saudi Arabia: The Crucial Years of Development, 1960–1982*. New York. Columbia University Press. 2012.

²² See, e.g., Commins, David. *Islam in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press. 2015; Al-Amer, Sultan. "Beyond Sectarianism and Ideology: Regionalism and Collective Political Action in Saudi Arabia," in Al-Rasheed, Madawi, ed. *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*. New York. Oxford University Press. 2018.



Incentive: Support development of nuclear energy for desalination

Two developments — increasing water scarcity and the Saudis' pursuit of a nuclear energy capability — are virtually certain to unfold in the near future.²³ Of the many attributes of global heating that climate scientists anticipate with high confidence is its effect on water supplies in the Persian Gulf region. For wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, or Kuwait, this is a manageable problem. Resource-rich economies have the money and energy supplies to desalinate seawater on a lavish scale. Poorer countries, including Yemen, Oman, and Jordan, for example, are constrained to conservation measures, and even these can be expensive when they entail large-scale repairs to deteriorating infrastructure.

As climate change gains traction and water supplies come increasingly under threat, Saudi Arabia appears committed to the construction of nuclear power plants with Chinese assistance. Unlike the kind of facility completed by the UAE with U.S. assistance, which forbade a nuclear fuel cycle, those built with Chinese assistance will produce fissile material. Proliferation is clearly a concern in this situation. The U.S. may or may not succeed in persuading the kingdom to forego enrichment capability. Reports of Saudi uranium deposits and Chinese assistance in producing yellowcake from locally mined uranium could presage a commitment to domestic fuel production regardless of U.S. or international proliferation complaints.

Regardless, a Saudi nuclear energy capability could be applied to desalination, as the Saudis have already pointed out. This would be a favorable development from an environmental perspective, given the energy-

intensive nature of desalination and the significant carbon emissions this process entails. From the perspective of regional cooperation on water security, Saudi Arabia could be encouraged to take the lead in supplying its neighbors with desalinated water. The positive impact on quality of life in the less well-endowed states in the region would be incalculable.²⁴ It would also reduce the scale of forced migration owing to climate change in the coming years. Saudi Arabia, in a consortium with other states, could construct a pipeline network to deliver desalinated water to contiguous states. As part of a package of U.S. initiatives to nudge Saudi Arabia's impulse to act independently of outside powers and exercise regional leadership, Riyadh's participation in a bold multilateral effort to provide water for the Persian Gulf region and apply its future nuclear energy capacity to good effect would warrant serious consideration.

Disincentive: End all weapons sales

Over the years, the United States has sold its most sophisticated weapons and military equipment to Saudi Arabia. These have included main battle tanks, combat and early warning aircraft, missile defense systems, naval surface ships, and advanced stand-off missiles and munitions. Several justifications have been proffered for these sales.

First, there was a desire to sell the Saudis weapons in the U.S. inventory to create an infrastructure for logistics and operational support for U.S. forces in the event the United States deploys forces in the region, either unilaterally or in combined operations with the Saudis. Second, these decisions were sometimes driven by an interest in lowering the unit cost for production of the same systems for the U.S. services; by achieving

²³ Al-Delaimy, Wael K. "Vulnerable Populations and Regions: Middle East as a Case Study," in Wael K. Al-Delaimy, ed. *Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility*. Springer Verlag. 14 May 2020, 121–133 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-31125-4_10
Mazzetti, Mark, David E. Sanger, and William J. Broad. "U.S. Examines Whether Saudi Nuclear Program Could Lead to Bomb Effort." *The New York Times*. August 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/us/politics/us-examines-saudi-nuclear-program.html>

²⁴ Sargent, Jack. "Climate Change and the Rentier States of the Persian Gulf." London School of Economics Blog. September 8, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/09/08/climate-change-and-the-rentier-states-of-the-gulf-cooperation-council/>



greater economies of scale, the services could buy more weapons to stock U.S. inventories and maintain a competitive military edge over other countries.

Third, reflecting a view widely (if uncritically) held by U.S. military and State Department officials, it was thought that weapons sales and the logistics tail that went along with these sales provided important access to and influence over key Saudi decision-makers, as well as greater transparency and information about the Saudi military establishment. Relatedly, American officials believed that Saudi dependence on U.S. training, support, and intelligence provided leverage the U.S. could use not only to shape Saudi choices on a broad range of issues, but also, if necessary, to exert some control over Saudi military operations that were inimical to U.S. interests (for example, in the event Saudi Arabia joined with other Arab forces to fight Israel). Finally, U.S. arms sales were seen as a token, by both countries, of the U.S. security commitment to Saudi Arabia — in the absence of any formal security commitment — and a concrete demonstration of America’s determination to remain a major actor in the Persian Gulf.

History has demonstrated that these justifications and the expectations they created often failed to materialize. Although the Saudis rely heavily on U.S. maintenance support, there is no evidence that the U.S. has used this dependence to gain leverage over Saudi decisions. Likewise, the link between arms sales and access, and what such access buys in the coin of influence, is at best murky and at worst nonexistent. Moreover, for all the military training the U.S. has provided, Saudi Arabia, in contrast to the UAE, has not demonstrated any high degree of military competence. As a result, the Saudi military has contributed almost nothing of value to U.S.—led coalition operations in Iraq or Syria but has used U.S. weapons systems in Yemen to create a humanitarian catastrophe.

The overall trend is clear: The U.S. military has gained very little military benefit from Saudi Arabia for its regional military operations, and the amount of U.S.

influence arms sales have bought over Saudi decision-making has been negligible at best. To the contrary, the military supply relationship the U.S. has created with Saudi Arabia, partly because of the other benefits the U.S. derives from it, has created a certain amount of “reverse leverage.” The Saudis would obviously prefer to maintain the status quo in this relationship for political, economic, military, and symbolic reasons, but Riyadh would almost certainly turn to other arms suppliers, as it has done in the past, if the U.S. threatened to cut off weapons sales to the kingdom. However, given that the U.S. receives almost no geopolitical benefit from the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, ending all weapons sales represents a card the U.S. should be willing to play.

Disincentive: Seek other regional partners

If Saudi Arabia continues to pursue regionally destabilizing policies, the U.S. should demonstrate that the so-called special relationship has ended and cultivate productive partnerships with different regional actors. The U.S. already has relations with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which have not adopted the same destructive policies as Saudi Arabia. For example, the UAE’s recent normalization with Israel has already precipitated a closer partnership with the U.S. on security, including an upcoming sale of F-35s. Relatedly, the U.S. has signaled that it may upgrade Qatar to the status of non-NATO ally, reinforcing that the U.S. has alternative security partners in the region. Deepening relations with Kuwait and Oman, especially in helping to support all the GCC countries as they work to diversify their economies, would expand U.S. influence without simultaneously flooding the region with additional weapons and raising the level of threat perceived by all.

The United States is best served by cultivating relationships with all states that support its interests, rather than locking into a position of perpetual friendship with some actors and enmity toward others, regardless of the impact of their policies. Although outreach to Iran is highly unlikely during the Trump

administration, a Biden administration might be able to improve U.S.–Iran relations, further enhancing U.S. maneuverability in the region.

As noted above, a lasting regional security architecture will require buy-in from both Riyadh and Tehran. The U.S. needs to allow local actors to take ownership of the process and the resulting institutional structure. However, the U.S. can and should encourage all parties, including Saudi Arabia, to invest in this process.

Conclusion

The current U.S. position toward Saudi Arabia has allowed the Saudis to act recklessly while still maintaining U.S. support. Simultaneously, the Saudis fear a U.S. military withdrawal and are incentivized to act as spoilers and interventionists in hopes of maintaining an active U.S. presence. The U.S. needs to help the Saudis understand that a U.S. military drawdown is inevitable, and therefore that greater regional stability is in their own self-interest.

As Saudi Arabia is the wealthiest and most populous state on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the oil reserve of last resort, its policies significantly impact the Gulf, the broader region, and the world. The Crown Prince has stated his commitment to enhancing Saudi Arabia's global leadership but has at times allowed his worst impulses to direct his actions. The U.S. should welcome and encourage constructive Saudi leadership as long as it serves stability and cooperation in the region.