# U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations

#### Relations between the two countries, long bound by common interests in oil and security, have strained over what some analysts see as a more assertive Saudi foreign policy.

Backgrounder*by Council on Foreign Relations*

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U.S. President Donald J. Trump walks with Saudi King Salman at a summit in Riyadh. Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

The U.S.-Saudi Arabia alliance is built on decades of security cooperation and strong business ties dominated by U.S. interests in Saudi oil. The relationship has survived severe challenges, including the 1973 oil embargo and 9/11 attacks, in which fifteen of the nineteen passenger jet hijackers were Saudi citizens. Successive U.S. administrations have held that Saudi Arabia is a critical strategic partner in the region.

Relations between the two countries have grown especially warm under U.S. President Donald J. Trump and Saudi de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman, who was elevated to crown prince in mid-2017. Both have ramped up efforts to counter Iran, Saudi Arabia’s main regional rival. However, recent actions under the crown prince’s leadership, particularly the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, are posing new strains on the alliance, as many members of the U.S. Congress have called for punishing Riyadh and reassessing the relationship.

#### Seventy-Year Alliance

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932, traces its roots to [an alliance](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/cron/) between the Saud family and descendants of religious cleric Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahab, who espoused conservative Sunni jurisprudence. This pact has endured for centuries, influencing the country’s domestic and foreign policy. Saudi authorities enforce religious restrictions, denying women rights they enjoy in Western democracies, and the government promotes its interpretation of sharia, or Islamic law, by funding religious schools around the world. Though it has recently lifted some restrictions, including a ban on women drivers, human rights groups say rights abuses persist.

The United States, first through its oil industry and then through government contacts, established a relationship with Saudi Arabia’s founder, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, and his successors that evolved into a close alliance despite a stark clash in values. U.S. businesses have been involved in Saudi Arabia’s oil industry [since 1933](http://www.cfr.org/world/timeline-oil-dependence-us-foreign-policy/p24322), when the Standard Oil Company of California (now Chevron) won a sixty-year concession to explore eastern Saudi Arabia. It made its first oil discovery there in 1938.

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the oil discovery’s strategic nature. His meeting with King Abdulaziz aboard the USS Quincy in Egypt in 1945 solidified the relationship. Saudi Arabia was officially neutral during World War II but allowed the Allies to use its airspace.

#### Oil

Standard Oil and the Texas Oil Company (Texaco) formed a partnership in Saudi Arabia in 1936 and together founded the Arabian American Oil Company, or Aramco, in 1944; the consortium later expanded to include what would later become Exxon and Mobil, helping Saudi Arabia become one of the world’s largest oil exporters. (The United States is expected to [soon overtake](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-26/citi-says-u-s-may-become-world-s-top-oil-exporter-next-year) Saudi Arabia as the top exporter.) Saudi Arabia gradually bought out foreign shareholders, and since 1980, the company, now known as Saudi Aramco, has been wholly government owned. U.S. companies Chevron, Dow Chemical, and ExxonMobil still have refining and petrochemical ventures in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia’s proven crude oil reserves are among the largest in the world. Its oil production averaged 10.7 million barrels a day, of which 7.43 million were exported, in September 2018, according to the [Joint Organizations Data Initiative](https://www.jodidata.org/), which compiles information about global energy production. The scale of the kingdom’s oil output and its founding role in the oil cartel Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) gives it great influence over energy markets; it has played a “central banker” role, adjusting its oil production levels to stabilize global oil prices. Protecting Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf producers has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy for decades.

OPEC has tried to steer oil markets since its formation in 1961, often directly affecting U.S. consumers. In 1973, Saudi Arabia embargoed sales of its oil to the United States in response to [U.S. support for the Israeli military](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo) in its war against Arab states. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia led OPEC in a price war to knock out competition from non-OPEC producers; the kingdom’s ability to quickly boost production caused oil prices to plummet by more than 60 percent over a six-month period. The drop severely hurt the Soviet Union’s oil revenues in the years before its collapse.

Balancing the oil market, or [making the price “fair”](https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Saudi-Arabias-Oil-Policy-in-Uncertain-Times-A-Shift-in-Paradigm.pdf) [PDF] for both producers and consumers, is the stated goal of Riyadh’s energy policy. However, more recently, the kingdom has manipulated oil prices to try to keep [U.S. shale](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hydraulic-fracturing-fracking) from becoming a viable competitor in the global market. In 2014, facing a glut in supply, Saudi Arabia and OPEC once again faced calls to curb production. But the Saudi oil minister at the time, Ali al-Naimi, persuaded OPEC to [keep pumping](https://uk.reuters.com/article/saudi-oil/update-2-saudi-arabia-expects-oil-price-to-stabilise-idUKL5N0W62G820150304) to force high-cost producers—those exploiting shale, oil sands, and deep-sea resources—to reduce their output. Another Saudi aim was to undercut Iran’s economy. The policy also put heightened pressure on Russia, which was sanctioned by the United States and others after its invasion of Crimea.

Oil prices subsequently fell to record lows of around $35 a barrel, and in a late 2016 reversal, Saudi Arabia, along with Russia, [pressed OPEC members](http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21711088-oil-prices-surge-saudi-arabia-and-iran-sign-deal-opecs-meeting) and other states to collectively curb their production. The six-month agreement, which went into effect in January 2017, was largely honored, [defying some analysts’ expectations](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-opec-oil-exclusive-idUSKBN17D1YF). OPEC continued to reduce its collective output, and by fall 2018 prices [topped $80 a barrel](https://markets.businessinsider.com/commodities/oil-price). However, following U.S. pressure, Saudi Arabia [boosted its supply](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-opec-survey/opec-oil-output-boost-in-september-limited-by-iran-losses-reuters-survey-idUSKCN1MB2FE) toward the end of the year amid declines in exports from Venezuela, suffering an economic crisis, and Iran, hit with new U.S. sanctions.

#### Defense and Counterterrorism

Providing security for the oil-rich Persian Gulf region has been a U.S. priority since World War II. U.S. companies were responsible for much of the oil produced in the region through the 1970s, and even as Saudi Arabia nationalized its oil industry at the end of that decade, it remained an important U.S. partner in the Cold War. The United States had for many years relied on Iran, under the rule of the shah, as part of a “twin pillar” policy of stabilizing the region. However, Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution upended that approach, leaving Saudi Arabia as the primary U.S. ally in the region for nearly four decades.

U.S.-Saudi military cooperation peaked in the first Gulf War, when in 1991 a U.S.-led coalition expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait. More than half a million U.S. troops flooded into the region, with [many based in Saudi Arabia](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/saudi-arabia-withdrawl-us-forces). The presence of U.S. soldiers drew ire from Saudi conservatives and reinforced arguments that the elite was too accommodating to Western and non-Muslim interests.

The United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which lasted from 1979 to 1989. Cash and weapons flowed to the Afghan jihad, which attracted thousands of Sunni Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, son of the founder of the largest construction company in Saudi Arabia, joined the jihad in the 1980s and recruited Saudi fighters.

Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia in 1990 with close links to the kingdom’s intelligence officials. But his opposition to U.S. troops in the Middle East put him at odds with the royal family, which welcomed the U.S. forces that had driven Saddam Hussein’s army out of Kuwait. Bin Laden, who would found al-Qaeda, left the country by early 1992 and was stripped of citizenship in 1994. From his new base in Afghanistan, where he was protected by the new Taliban leadership, bin Laden issued a fatwa against “[Americans occupying the land of the two holy mosques](http://fas.org/irp/crs/RS21973.pdf)” [PDF], referring to the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina, in 1996.

Following the 9/11 attacks, a wave of popular anti-Saudi sentiment in the United States [damaged relations between the countries](http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/united-states-saudi-arabia-relationship-threatened-misconceptions/p6982?cid=nlc-press_release-press_note--link11-20150123&sp_mid=47889754&sp_rid=cm1jbWFob25AY2ZyLm9yZwS2). The George W. Bush administration’s [omission of twenty-eight pages](http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/twenty-eight-pages) from the [9/11 Commission Report](http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/) fueled speculation that the U.S. government was covering up evidence that Saudi officials were complicit in the attacks. In 2016, the U.S. Congress passed legislation, over President Barack Obama’s veto and Saudi threats of [economic retaliation](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-warns-ofeconomic-fallout-if-congress-passes-9-11-bill.html), that allows the families of 9/11 victims to sue the kingdom, an exception to the principle of sovereign immunity. Some legal scholars, however, say that plaintiffs would [likely be unable](https://www.cfr.org/interview/what-911-lawsuits-bill-will-do) to collect on any damages.

Saudi Arabia is the top destination for U.S. arms, with U.S. defense sales to the kingdom totaling close to [$90 billion](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/10/15/why-trump-wants-keep-lockheed-boeing-others-business-with-saudi-arabia/) since 1950, according to the Pentagon. President Trump has encouraged such deals, arguing that they create [half a million American jobs](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arms-jobs-exclusive/exclusive-defense-firms-see-only-hundreds-of-new-u-s-jobs-from-saudi-mega-deal-idUSKCN1N40DM); several major defense firms have made lower projections. During his May 2017 trip to the kingdom, Trump signed a series of arms deals expected to total some $350 billion over a decade. According to the arms researcher SIPRI, Saudi Arabia’s total arms imports were [almost eighteen times greater](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php) [PDF] in 2017 than they were a decade earlier.

#### Divergence and Realignment

U.S.-Saudi Arabia relations have never been in complete harmony. Terrorism financing, the export of the kingdom’s interpretation of Islam, human rights abuses, and the lack of democratic representation, as [documented annually](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper) by the State Department, have all caused friction.

Although historically the United States and Saudi Arabia have had the common objectives of regional stability and containing Iran, they differed on core issues during the Obama administration. Saudi Arabia was dismayed by the lack of U.S. support for ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and that it was not included in initial negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program, which were conducted in secret in Oman in 2013. Saudi leadership also chafed at President Obama’s vision that the kingdom “[share the neighborhood](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/)” with Iran.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a source of contention from early days. During the second intifada (2000–2005), Riyadh proposed the [Arab Peace Initiative](http://reliefweb.int/report/israel/text-arab-peace-initiative-adopted-beirut-summit), under which Arab countries would normalize relations with Israel in exchange for its withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories and a “just solution” for Palestinian refugees. Elements of the initiative were adopted by the Bush and Obama administrations. Many Arab states have criticized the Trump administration’s more outright support of Israel. The Saudi royal court denounced the U.S. decision in 2018 to [recognize Jerusalem](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whats-stake-us-recognition-jerusalem) as Israel’s capital. As Israeli-Gulf ties, particularly intelligence cooperation, have strengthened over mutual enmity toward Iran, the Trump administration hopes that Saudi Arabia will push the Palestinians to take part in a U.S.-led peace process.

#### War in Yemen

Mohammed bin Salman launched an [intervention in Yemen’s civil war](http://www.cfr.org/yemen/yemen-crisis/p36488) in 2015, while he served as defense minister, marking a shift to a more aggressive Saudi posture in the region. The Obama administration provided Saudi Arabia with arms, intelligence, and aerial refueling to prosecute the campaign against Houthi rebels, who are supported by Iran, but there were [underlying disagreements](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-yemen-idUSKCN12A0BQ) between U.S. and Saudi policymakers. The Obama administration, in its final months, [suspended the sale](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-sale-yemen-war.html) of precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia amid high levels of civilian casualties. The Trump administration has [reversed this](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-arms-saudi-emirates/congress-reviewing-sale-of-precision-munitions-to-saudis-uae-sources-idUSKCN1IO032).

Some U.S. lawmakers have sought to block portions of arms sales and U.S. participation in the war. Congress has required that the secretary of state [certify the coalition](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/12/world/middleeast/saudi-yemen-pompeo-certify.html) is taking sufficient action to mitigate harm to civilians to continue military support. At a [September 2018 CFR event](https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir), Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir defended the intervention, saying that “this is a war that was imposed on us.” In November, as congressional pressure mounted, the Trump administration ended refueling operations for coalition aircraft, after consultation with Riyadh.

#### A New Heir to the Throne

King Salman appointed bin Salman as crown prince in June 2017. Bin Salman had already launched his [Vision 2030](http://vision2030.gov.sa/en) initiative, which aims to diversify the Saudi economy and boost foreign investment. The crown prince [consolidated his control of military and security agencies](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77570), disbanding longstanding patronage networks and quashing potential rivals in the royal family. Within months of his appointment, the heir apparent drew widespread criticism for launching a regional blockade of Qatar and ordering a corruption crackdown in which dozens of Saudi elites were arrested and detained without formal charges. Amid the shake-up, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was summoned to Riyadh, where he [resigned under apparent pressure](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-saad-hariri-mohammed-bin-salman-lebanon.html). (He withdrew the resignation upon his return to Lebanon.) Arrests of prominent religious and political activists, including dissidents, have prompted human rights advocates to criticize the country’s leadership.

The Trump administration has generally embraced the new Saudi leadership. Saudi actions in 2018, however, brought to the fore questions about U.S. support for the kingdom. Late this year, U.S. lawmakers and human rights groups called on the administration to penalize Riyadh for the murder of Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia’s Istanbul consulate. In November, the U.S. Treasury Department levied sanctions against seventeen Saudi officials suspected of being involved. However, President Trump dismissed proposals to cut arms sales to the kingdom and backed bin Salman’s assertions that he did not order the killing, despite the [reported conclusions](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/cia-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggi.html) of the CIA.

“The idea that the crown prince himself and Saudi Arabia were assets to the United States was entirely aspirational. In practice, the Saudis have been nothing but a headache,” [wrote CFR’s Steven A. Cook](https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/22/the-saudis-are-killing-americas-middle-east-policy/) in Foreign Policy.

#### Financial Ties

Saudi government officials and businessmen, both royals and commoners, have deep ties to the United States that extend beyond oil to finance and [Silicon Valley](https://qz.com/1426370/silicon-valley-is-awash-with-saudi-arabian-money-heres-what-theyre-investing-in/). Saudi ministers, including those of finance and petroleum, have degrees from U.S. universities. Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, an alumnus of Syracuse University, is the kingdom’s most famous billionaire investor and owns stakes in Citigroup, Twitter, and Snap. (Bin Talal was [detained for nearly three months](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-alwaleed-bin-talal.html) as part of the 2017 crackdown.) Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund has [stakes in major U.S. tech firms](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-22/what-s-next-for-saudi-arabia-s-sovereign-wealth-fund-quicktake), including Uber and Tesla.

These ties, along with the large number of wealthy families in Saudi Arabia, have long made the country a source of investments in U.S. companies. Many international fundraising “road shows” for private equity firms and hedge funds make stops in Riyadh, or at least visits with the bankers in Dubai who manage money for Saudis. Moreover, many U.S. and European firms have opened or expanded operations in Saudi Arabia since it opened its stock market to foreign investors in 2015. Following Khashoggi’s murder, however, dozens of top business leaders and media sponsors pulled out of a major investment conference for the kingdom. Analysts say that it will be difficult for Saudi Arabia to [realize its vision](https://www.cfr.org/blog/ipo-politics-and-saudi-us-visit) for economic reform without such foreign investment.

Fatimah Alyas contributed to this report.

# The Inconvenient Truth About Saudi Arabia

#### The United States should pressure MBS to act with greater restraint in Yemen and elsewhere.

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Bandar Algaloud/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The 2006 documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” highlights former US Vice President Al Gore’s efforts to alert his fellow Americans to the perils of global warming. What made the truth inconvenient is that avoiding catastrophic climate change would require people to live differently and, in some cases, give up what they love (such as gas-guzzling cars).

For nearly two months, we have all been living with another inconvenient truth – ever since Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist working for The Washington Post and living in the United States, disappeared after entering Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul.

A large part of the truth is undeniable: Khashoggi was murdered by individuals with close ties to the Saudi government and its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (widely known as MBS). Weeks of official Saudi denials and lies only reinforced the conclusion – now also the reported judgment of the CIA – that the murder was premeditated and approved at the top. MBS’s direct role may not be 100% proven, but most observers familiar with Saudi Arabia harbor little doubt. This is not a system that tolerates much freelancing.

What makes the truth inconvenient is Saudi Arabia’s strategic importance. The Kingdom still accounts for over 10% of global oil output. Its sovereign wealth fund sits on an estimated $500 billion. Saudi Arabia is the most influential Sunni Arab country, occupying a special role within the Muslim world, owing to its role as the custodian of Islam’s holiest sites. It is central to any policy of confronting Iran.

Moreover, MBS, for all his faults, is something of a reformer, understanding that his country must open up and diversify if it is to thrive and the royal family is to survive. He is also popular at home, especially with younger Saudis, who constitute the bulk of the population.

The problem is that the faults of the young and impulsive Crown Prince are many. In addition to his role in the murder of Khashoggi, he recklessly ordered the Saudi attack on Yemen that triggered his country’s equivalent of the US war in Vietnam – a strategic and humanitarian catastrophe. He kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister, did all he could to undermine Qatar, arrested wealthy Saudis who refused to embrace his consolidation of power, froze diplomatic relations with Canada over a critical tweet, and imprisoned political activists, including women seeking greater rights.

The Saudi strategy for dealing with the outcry over Khashoggi’s murder is clear: hunker down and weather the storm. MBS and his inner circle are calculating that the world’s outrage will fade, given their country’s importance. He has good reason to believe that other Sunni Arab states will stand by him, given the subsidies he provides.

Israel, too, has indicated support for MBS, owing to his willingness to move in the direction of normalizing relations and, more important, the two countries’ shared interest in countering Iranian influence in the region. And US President Donald Trump’s administration is standing by its man, so far refusing to acknowledge his role in Khashoggi’s murder and resisting calls for sanctions against Saudi Arabia.

What, then, should be done? Former US Secretary of State James A. Baker recently drew a parallel to US policy toward China in 1989, at the time of the massacre of protesting students in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. George H.W. Bush’s administration (of which I was a part) worked hard to thread the needle: introducing sanctions to convey displeasure with the Chinese government, but limiting the punishment and keeping lines of communication open, given China’s importance.

Would a similar policy toward Saudi Arabia prove viable?

Ideally, the US and European governments would let it be known that they would be more open to working with Saudi Arabia if the power of the Crown Prince were reduced. There should also be limits on US arms sales and intelligence support, which, fortunately, the US Congress is likely to impose.

But more important than any sanction would be ratcheting up public and private pressure on MBS regarding what is needed and what needs to be avoided. What is needed is a concerted push to end the Yemen conflict. What needs to be avoided is exploitation of the Trump administration’s anti-Iran animus to provoke an armed confrontation that would force others to overcome their qualms and side with Saudi Arabia.

A war with Iran would be costly and dangerous. MBS should be made to understand that the US will be a strategic partner for Saudi Arabia only if he acts with greater restraint in Yemen and elsewhere, and with greater respect for US interests.

Consultations should also be held with China and Russia. Unlike the US, both have working relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which gives both a stake in preventing such a war from starting and shutting it down quickly if it does.

All too often in the Middle East, a bad situation becomes a worse situation. MBS has created a bad situation. The aim should be to establish sufficient limits so that it does not become worse.

# The Saudis Are Killing America’s Middle East Policy

#### Mohammad bin Salman isn’t just ruining his own reputation—he’s spoiling Washington’s policies across the region.

Article*by*[Steven A. Cook](https://www.cfr.org/expert/steven-cook)*, Author*

*Last updated October 31, 2018*



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud is seen during a meeting with U.N Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the United Nations headquarters in the Manhattan borough of New York City, New York, U.S. March 27, 2018 To match Insight SAUDI-POLITICS/KING REUTERS/Amir Levy/File Photo

This article first appeared [here](https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/22/the-saudis-are-killing-americas-middle-east-policy/)on ForeignPolicy.com on October 22, 2018.

U.S. President Donald Trump could kill someone on the White House lawn and Washington would still be talking about the disappearance and presumed murder of Jamal Khashoggi. It has been an extraordinary three weeks inside the Beltway. Not since Monica Lewinsky’s daily dash from a car to the lobby of her lawyer’s office building on Connecticut Avenue in 1998 has the city been so focused on a single story.

There are four reasons for this fixation. First, Khashoggi wrote a column for the hometown newspaper in a place where people make news, write about news, and obsess about news. Second, there is the Trump administration’s apparently close relationship with Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is suspected of ordering the columnist’s death. This gives the episode a certain partisan bent, even if there are [prominent Republicans](https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/16/graham-sanction-saudi-arabia-905641) who want to “sanction the hell out of Saudi Arabia.” Third, it raises uncomfortable questions about Riyadh’s influence among Washington’s elite. Finally, and most importantly, it heightens an ongoing debate about the wisdom of Washington’s ties with Saudi Arabia’s apparently heedless crown prince, who along with killing poor Khashoggi may also have killed American Middle East policy.

There was a certain logic to the Trump administration’s approach to the region that gave pride of place to Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman. Surveying the wreckage of the Middle East on Jan. 21, 2017, the new team in the White House no doubt quickly discovered it had few, if any, options other than Saudi Arabia—all the other Arab countries were either failing, staggering from crisis to crisis, or limited by small size. So, when Trump indicated he would make good on his campaign promise to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and take a hard line on Iranian adventurism around the region, the Saudis were more than supportive. When Trump wanted to “completely destroy” the Islamic State and fight Islamist extremism, the Saudis said they would help and opened the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology to much fanfare (and derision) during the president’s visit to Riyadh in 2017. Trump wanted to pursue Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the Saudis promised to be helpful. Trump wanted to sell beautiful American weapons, so the Saudis committed to buying billions of dollars of them. When people think about Saudi Arabia, they tend to think immediately of oil, but arms trade has become an increasingly important facet of the bilateral relationship.

As for the administration’s relationship with the Saudi crown prince, that was a fait accompli. King Salman had clearly decided that his son was going to succeed him—instead of his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef—by the time the president walked through the doors of the Oval Office for the first time. It was likely okay with the president anyway. Saudi watchers believe that King Salman has groomed his favorite son to be king because he is said to be tough, and let’s face it, Trump likes bad boys. In addition to this apparent affinity, someone in the White House must have thought it would be a good idea for Trump’s 37-year-old son-in-law to be the point person with the 33-year-old crown prince—forgetting, of course, that the former had zero diplomatic experience and the latter is far from worldly.

Whether sophisticated or not, the crown prince seemed to understand that his country was badly in need of change. The economic and social—but not political—reforms that Mohammed bin Salman proposed were cheered in Washington because they promised to strengthen the Saudi economy and thus the country’s stability, which is what policymakers have long sought in Saudi Arabia.

Of course, the idea that the crown prince himself and Saudi Arabia were assets to the United States was entirely aspirational. In practice, the Saudis have been nothing but a headache. It is positive that Mohammed bin Salman reined in the religious police, allowed movie theaters to open, gave his blessing to concerts, and has overseen an initial effort to chip away at the gender apartheid that has characterized Saudi society. But as important as those developments are, Saudi Arabia seems to be experiencing a wave of repression. It was never an open place, but having accumulated personal political power, the crown prince seems intent on silencing all dissent no matter from how far away or how mild. His response to his international critics is essentially, “I am the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. Deal with it.” That does not directly affect the United States, but it does make the crown prince a raft of enemies, raising legitimate questions of whether in Mohammed bin Salman’s drive for power he is not also destabilizing Saudi Arabia, where a delicate balance among different constituents has long kept the peace.

On foreign policy, for all of Saudi Arabia’s recent chest-thumping, Riyadh has not achieved anything. The Saudis picked a fight with Canada—an exemplary global citizen—over a tweet, making them look petty and weak, the exact opposite of what they intended. Mohammed bin Salman and his closest regional ally, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, along with Egypt and Bahrain, imposed a blockade on Qatar starting in June 2017. After a brief wobble in the Qatari economy, Doha seems to be carrying on quite well without the Saudis and their partners. The only thing this blockade seems to have done is annoy U.S. defense planners who would prefer not to have to work around what seems like a personal feud while they are trying to fight terrorists and contain Iran. And the Palestinians clearly do not trust the Saudis to be impartial interlocutors in the Trump administration’s effort to persuade Mahmoud Abbas to unceremoniously surrender to the Israelis.

Most important is Saudi Arabia’s disastrous intervention in Yemen, which was launched to prevent, in the words of Saudi officials, the “Hezbollah-ization” of that country and the destabilization of the Arabian Peninsula, but has instead pretty much made those outcomes inevitable. The United States is confronted with a strategic ally stuck in a war it cannot win, sucking the Saudis of resources and further tipping the regional scale in favor of the Iranians. By supporting Riyadh logistically in Yemen, Washington is associated with a government that has demonstrated an astonishing disregard for the amount of suffering it has caused, reflected most recently last summer when Saudi military officials insisted for weeks that a school bus full of children hit in an airstrike was a legitimate target. Under mounting pressure, the Saudis promised to investigate.

And now they have created an international uproar over the killing of someone who posed zero threat to the safety and national security of Saudi Arabia. It seems that the new Saudis are proving themselves to be as inept, arrogant, and tin-eared as the old Saudis, but worse, because they are emboldened by a mistaken belief in their own greatness.

Recently, the editorial board of the Washington Post [asked](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/who-needs-saudi-arabia/2018/10/15/3ebe473c-d0a1-11e8-8c22-fa2ef74bd6d6_story.html), “Who needs Saudi Arabia?” It is a good question, and not just because the Post’s editors and reporters are outraged about what happened to their colleague and friend. Look closely at everything the Saudis have done recently, especially those policies associated with the crown prince, and the answer is, “Not us.” It is true that they recently gave the United States $100 million to go toward the stabilization of Syria, which is a good thing, but the overwhelming record thus far under King Salman and his son can be categorized as either unhelpful or counterproductive.

In response to this criticism, the Saudis will no doubt argue, “You Americans demand that we do more to protect our own security and advance our common interests. When Saudis finally do it, all you do is complain and criticize. What are we supposed to do?” They have a point, but if they want to salvage their ties with the United States, the answer to their own question is simple: Act like adults.

# How Women’s Small Acts of Resistance Threaten the Iranian Government

Voices from the Field features contributions from scholars and practitioners highlighting new research, thinking, and approaches to development challenges. This piece is authored by Madison Schramm, Hillary Rodham Clinton Research Fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security.

Blog Post*by*[Guest Blogger for the Women and Foreign Policy Program](https://www.cfr.org/bio/guest-blogger-women-and-foreign-policy-program)

*December 5, 2018*



Women wait for a bus in central Tehran, Iran. REUTERS/Darren Staples

Voices from the Field features contributions from scholars and practitioners highlighting new research, thinking, and approaches to development challenges. This piece is authored by [Madison Schramm](http://giwps.georgetown.edu/madison-schramm/), Hillary Rodham Clinton Research Fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security. This post was [cross-posted on the GIWPS Blog](https://giwps.georgetown.edu/how-womens-small-acts-of-resistance-threaten-the-iranian-government/).

In the past few months, Iranian women have been arrested for dancing and detained for [riding bicycles](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/12/girls-ride-bikes-iranian-women-defy-cycling-fatwa-tehran). Why do women’s seemingly benign actions generate such backlash from the Iranian government?

Women’s bodies are supposed to be subjects of the state—used by the government to project a desired societal image. But women in Iran are increasingly defying restrictive laws and fatwas—and leveraging the power of social media to challenge state control. Regulating women’s bodies is a common practice internationally. In a number of European countries, there is an effective ban on niqabs and burkas. Since 2011, women in France have been restricted from covering their faces in public.  As [Ann Towns has argued](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/heike.schotten/readings/Towns,%20Women%20as%20Standard%20of%20Civilization.pdf), leaders often regulate women’s appearance and movement in an attempt to control the national narrative.

In authoritarian states, opportunities to mobilize and organize against state control—of women’s bodies or otherwise— is extremely limited and dangerous. In grossly asymmetrical power struggles, resistance and activism have to take a different form from mass protests or rallies. James Scott has written extensively about [some of these tactics](https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300036411/weapons-weak) in his book Weapons of the Weak, which investigates Malaysian peasants’ resistance through seemingly small individual acts of insubordination, like foot dragging. These tactics are important even though they are often overlooked or minimized. As Scott explains, “Subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity.” Women [internationally](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1387102) have long relied on these daily acts of resistance to challenge patriarchal systems.  Even in the US, before suffrage, before #MeToo was even dream, women relied on these [tactics](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8753) to challenge power structures.

In Iran, women are using everyday resistance to challenge rules that attempt to control their bodies. Shortly after the revolution, then Supreme Leader Khomeini introduced laws requiring all women to wear the hijab and conform their attire to religious teachings. Women are required to wear floor length pants or skirts, long sleeve coats that reach between their knees and mid-thighs, and to cover their heads. As the leader of the [Wednesday movement](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40218711) and My Stealthy Freedom, Masih Alinejad explained, “[It’s just the first step after the revolution that the government started to control our body](https://www.npr.org/2018/05/30/615457127/exiled-journalist-continues-to-fight-for-womens-rights-in-iran).”

The new state framed these changes as a response to the [imperialist restrictions enforced by the Shah](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539513001647), and Reza Pahlavi’s earlier ban of the veil. In both instances, women’s bodies were leveraged as sites of contestation—in the first as a symbol of modernization and the latter as a symbol of the Islamic Revolution.

Women face pressure to comply from not only the state, but from family, friends, and religious leaders. Despite enormous pressure, some Iranian women are turning this narrative on their head, using the powerful symbolism of their bodies to challenge the status quo. In Tehran, fashion shows have become part of the social scene. You can find women in [colorful dress](https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/ame/9/2/ame090204.xml), [wearing](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/iran-fashion-style-modelling-illegal-photographer-olzac-bozalp-images-a7669971.html) jeans to work, embellished shoes, and chunky jewelry, revealing perfectly manicured nails and bangs peeking out beneath the veil. In doing so, they are challenging state control. Others are even removing their hijab, posting pictures on social media. Some women have even tied their hijabs to sticks, waving them as [makeshift flags](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/women-in-iran-are-pulling-off-their-headscarves--and-hoping-for-a-turning-point/2018/03/08/bb238a96-217c-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html?utm_term=.1da2266e76f6). This resistance puts women at risk of arrest by the morality police or far worse.

These actions are powerful. If they weren’t, then why would the state invest so much in stopping them? At a time when women internationally are grappling with how best to resist patriarchal systems working to control our bodies, we can garner insight and find strength in women’s everyday acts of resistance in Iran. Laws in Iran systematically restrict women’s civil liberties, but many women in Iran are using everyday resistance to challenge the rules that attempt to control them.

# Iranian Oil Sanctions: Myths and Realities of U.S. Energy Independence

Blog Post*by*[Amy Myers Jaffe](https://www.cfr.org/experts/amy-myers-jaffe)*, Author Council on Foreign Relations*

*November 5, 2018*



A gas flare on an oil production platform in the Soroush oil fields is seen alongside an Iranian flag in the Persian Gulf, Iran, July 25, 2005. OPEC-OIL/ REUTERS/Raheb Homavandi/File Photo

Renewed U.S. sanctions against Iranian oil exports kick in officially this week as part of the Trump administration’s decision to exit the Iranian nuclear deal. Estimations on how effective the sanctions have been is a relatively messy affair to date. Iran is expected to lose between 1 million to 1.5 million barrels a day in oil sales to Europe, Japan, South Korea, and India, with speculation that some of that oil might wind up instead in China or being repurposed in barter trade with Russia.

Today, the U.S. government officially confirmed it was handing out temporary waivers to several of the countries that had previously announced intentions to go to zero purchases from Iran. Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, the announcement, aimed to keep oil markets from overheating, calls into question the ultimate effectiveness of the Trump Iranian sanctions project overall. Worse still, it has simultaneously lay bare the fact that President Donald Trump, like countless U.S. presidents before him, has to worry about global oil prices in conducting foreign policy, despite an abundance of U.S. domestic energy.

Iran has long experience in trying to avoid restrictions on its oil sales [including turning off internationally-required tanker transponders](https://thearabweekly.com/tehran-looks-ways-circumvent-oil-sanctions) to make it harder to track its shipping movements. But available [satellite assisted tracking technology](https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-new-iran-sanctions-loom-oil-smuggling-is-a-tougher-racket-1541076444) has improved since 2012, the last time the U.S. imposed sanctions on Iran. Tracking services are now offering up to the minute updates on Iranian oil exports, helping to illuminate the shadowy world of smuggling. One famous service, Tanker Trackers, even located with precision recent Iranian deliveries to China’s strategic petroleum reserve in Dalian.

In years past, Iran has tried to entice major trading partners to evade sanctions compliance by promising sweetheart oil and gas exploration and other lucrative commercial deals. But the more uncertain long range commercial outlook for prolific Middle East reserves weakens [Tehran’s bargaining chips](https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF03/20130507/100793/HHRG-113-IF03-Wstate-JaffeA-20130507.pdf). Fewer players, be they government-run firms or private companies, are looking to increase access to oil reserves in a place like Iran these days. After losing billions in investments in geopolitically risky international oil and gas ventures, China’s government has [shifted efforts](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/green-giant) to new, clean energy technologies like renewables, batteries and automated cars. Europe’s big oil companies like Norway’s Equinor, France’s Total, and Royal Dutch Shell are also shifting to renewables and minding their knitting in places with less geopolitical risk. Also losing interest in risky international ventures, many American firms are squarely focused on [new North American shale reserves](https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/15/the-americas-not-the-middle-east-will-be-the-world-capital-of-energy/) that are now challenging the Middle East for market share.

Many European, Japanese, and South Korean refiners initially responded to the Trump administration’s call for zero purchases of Iranian oil by quickly saying they would comply with the new U.S. sanctions, and French firm Total abandoned its natural gas development project in Iran. Ironically, all these pledged sanctions compliance announcements shook oil markets which were already tightening from a deal between the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Russia to limit supply to boost the price of oil. That prompted U.S. President Donald Trump to [start tweeting](https://www.cfr.org/blog/oil-prices-and-us-economy-reading-tea-leaves-trump-tweet-opec)at Saudi Arabia to intervene with more oil as they had done when then U.S. President Barack Obama had hardened Iranian oil sanctions in 2012 to get Tehran to the negotiating table.

Had oil markets been oversupplied at the time the Trump administration was initiating new Iranian sanctions, chances are most countries would have begrudgingly gone along in a manner that would not have disturbed oil prices or added risk to the global economy. But in the context of a crisis-torn Venezuela [and surprising reports](http://www.energyintel.com/pages/eig_article.aspx?DocID=1016064&utm_campaign=top-story&utm_medium=site&utm_source=3&utm_content=Saudis+Conduct+Review+of+Shrinking+Spare+Capacity-1016064&ts=1) that [Saudi Arabia’s ability](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/10/18/saudi-arabia-oil-221612) to produce more oil was more limited than previously supposed, the administration was faced with harder choices.

Before offering its official [statement](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-secretary-state-secretary-treasury-secretary-energy-4/) on October 31, 2018, that “sufficient” oil supplies existed to permit a significant reduction in the petroleum purchased from Iran, the administration first jawboned Saudi Arabia to increase its production further, and then, in the aftermath of the Khashoggi scandal and related public U.S.-Saudi strains, the U.S. State Department was forced to hint that waivers would be given to countries having difficulty finding replacement barrels for Iranian purchases. Oil prices began to recede. In all, eight countries officially received such  [temporary waivers](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-sanctions/us-expected-to-give-eight-countries-iran-sanctions-waivers-sources-idUSKCN1N70OZ), including Turkey, India and South Korea late last week. The waffling on sanctions enforcement has definitely helped with oil prices but it means that Iran will have an easier time finding outlets for its oil production, even if it can only take back goods as payment and not cash. Added oil supplies are expected on the market [in early 2019](https://www.forbes.com/sites/daneberhart/2018/09/10/shales-latest-challenge-is-overcoming-its-own-success/#78f00dba2261) when infrastructure additions will allow higher exports of U.S. crude oil. [U.S. diplomats are also working to free up more oil](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-redoubles-efforts-to-resolve-oil-field-disputes-to-boost-global-supply-1541112738) from northern Iraq and the Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone in the coming months.

That Trump had to berate the Saudis and then capitulate on Iranian sanctions enforcement is a testament to the limitations of U.S. energy independence. Unlike in OPEC countries, additional U.S. oil export capacity isn’t just magically available on demand by pronouncement by government leaders. The pace of investment in new oil wells, export pipelines, and terminals is in a cacophony of dozens and dozens of independent, uncoordinated commercial oil company decisions that are dictated by markets and capital planning processes. Over the next month or two, rising U.S. oil production, which hit its historical record this month, remains stuck inland, constrained by pipeline bottlenecks. Even when those bottlenecks help keep the price of oil in Texas at a discount to international levels, it doesn’t help the Trump administration, which has to worry about how any shock in the global price of oil would disturb its broader goals that are related to the dollar, trade and global economic growth.

That reality became even more apparent when Saudi Arabia hinted it could unsheathe its oil weapon after 44 years of quiescence, if the newly-elected U.S. Congress chooses to enforce the Magnitsky Act in response to the death of Jamal Khashoggi.  Reminding Americans of previous gasoline lines caused by the 1973 Saudi oil embargo, a Saudi commentator noted that the Saudi energy minister’s need to deny the possibility of a replay of 1973 signaled [“to those who understand global politics that Saudi Arabia had many cards to play.](http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/546739/Opinion/Local-Viewpoint/Messing-around-with-Saudi-Arabia-is-suicidal)” The incident laid bare an ugly reality: even with all our newfound oil and gas, America and its allies still need strategic stocks to protect the global economy from any rising petro-power that would try to use oil to blackmail the West into compliance to a political result they don’t want. U.S. production, though responsive to rising prices, is not able to surge rapidly enough to damp down a sudden supply shock. This was certainly noticed in China, which is only half way through building its own stockpile expected to reach 850 million barrels by 2020. China has increased its pace of stock building in the past few weeks, ironically with soon to be sanctioned Iranian oil. It is also a result that has taught a new generation of U.S. leaders about the limits of American oil power.

* [Printfriendly.com](http://printfriendly.com/)

# Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the United States: Abizaid's Mission Possible?

By Anthony H. Cordesman, Center for Strategic and International Studies

November 19, 2018

The appointment of General John Abizaid as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia comes at a time there are so many tensions over Khashoggi and Yemen that it may seem like mission impossible. Nevertheless, Ambassador Abizaid may well be the right man for the worst time, and may still be able to heal a strategic partnership at a critical time. He is one of the few Americans with the status and experience needed to deal with a key partner at time of crisis, and his military background can be a key asset in giving him credibility in dealing with the most critical issues the U.S. must now address.

Abizaid can only hope to be effective, however, if he is given the right priorities and the right missions. This requires at least five critical changes in the behavior of America's Arab strategic partners. It also requires an equal number of key shifts in behavior of the United States. The key to success in each case will be changes in U.S. and Saudi relations, and much will depend on the support Abizaid gets from Washington. Abizaid will need the backing of the President and a divided Congress in making such changes, and a level of consistency in U.S. policy that has been lacking for far too long.

#### ****Dealing with Arab Failures: Giving Khashoggi's Death Meaning****

The most difficult immediate issue is the aftermath of the Khashoggi killing. The U.S. has taken a clear stand about the murder, and has sanctioned Saudi officials. It must continue to react to any new evidence that surfaces over time. Nevertheless, the U.S. already to look beyond the current focus on responsibility for that murder – an effort that now comes far too close to supporting a Turkish-led effort to hold a diplomatic and media trial of the Saudi Crown Prince that is designed to serve Turkey's strategic interests in ways that ignore its own guilt for equal or greater abuses.

Events have already held Mohammed Bin Salman to account to the extent a de facto head of state can be held in an account in a region where most regimes – including that of Turkey's Erdogan –are equally guilty. He will never fully escape the doubts about his role, and his every future action will be judged internationally in context of Khashoggi's death.

The U.S. goal in dealing with Saudi Arabia should now be to give Khashoggi's death purpose and meaning. The U.S. should now focus is on levering Khashoggi's death to pressure Saudi Arabia to make the kind of improvements in Saudi security and counterterrorism efforts that protect human rights and the rule of law, and do not abuse legitimate political opposition.

Hopefully, Mohammed Bin Salman will have learned how stupidly pointless suppressing and killing the voices of peaceful dissent can really be. Serious and consistent U.S. official pressure for steady reform can have an effect. Letting Erdogan trap the U.S. into a one country, one victim focus on one regional leader that serves the goals of an even more abusive Turkey at the expense of broader U.S. interests and efforts to improve human rights will nothing to aid the causes Khashoggi advocated and can only compound his tragedy.

#### ****Dealing with Arab Failures: Ending the Region's Childish Game of Thrones****

Another step forward in this direction -- and one that would serve both the broader regional need for reform – and the strategic interests of both the United States and all the Arab Gulf states – would be for the President, and Secretaries of State and Defense to support Ambassador Abizaid in putting an end to the Saudi-UAE-Bahraini boycott of Qatar.

This is an essential step in finding the right compromises that will ensures no Gulf state tolerates links to terrorism or violent extremism, but counterterrorism does not take the form of treating a broad movement like the Muslim Brotherhood as if every element was extreme, or treating irritating and biased media like Al Jazeera as a critical threat.

Qatar has already made some needed reforms as a result of the boycott, and probably needs to make more. It has been just as petty and childish in attacking key Saudis as they have been in attacking Saudi Arabia. The boycott is gross overkill, however, and threatening to dig a canal to cut Qatar off from the Arabian Peninsula is simply absurd. Saudi Arabia needs to accept the fact that legitimate dissent and criticism may often be unfairly critical and biased, and have a questionable ideological base, but they are also essential political and social relief valves and alternatives to extremism and violence.

Abizaid will need to support of serious U.S. pressure on all the countries concerned to end the boycott and create some form of real unity within the Arab Gulf states – a unity that ends the current Saudi-UAE Bahrain vs. Qatar and Oman split and partial isolation of Kuwait – is a critical step if Abizaid is to perform his most critical security mission. The U.S. needs effective security partners in dealing with both Iran and violent extremism, and this requires effective and unifying Saudi leadership that respects the needs of the other states.

#### ****Dealing with Arab Failures: Pressing for Real Unity in Arab Gulf Efforts to Deter Iran and Check Extremism****

Abizaid will also need full backing from the White House, Departments of State and Defense, and USCENTCOM in pressing for the kind of progress in Gulf security cooperation that is critical to meeting both Arab Gulf and U.S. strategic interests. The Gulf Cooperation Council or GCC – which includes ever Arab Gulf state except Iraq – has been the hollow, dysfunctional shell of an effective military alliance since its founding. Moreover, it now faces critical new challenges like creating effective, integrated missile defense and aid, countering Iran's mix of threats to shipping in and near the Gulf, and developing and far more integrated approaches to counterterrorism.

Such a revamping of the Arab Gulf alliance, however, means that Abizaid must help Saudi Arabia to change its approach to the GCC and Gulf security cooperation. Saudi Arabia – as the most powerful Arab state – must lead and persuade, not try to command and attempt to punish. It means that Saudi Arabia must recognize that its role as the custodian of Islam's holy places does not mean it can exclude other interpretations of Sunni practices or other sects like Shi'ites.

It means that the Kingdom must recognize that focusing on its ties to the UAE, rather than all the Arab Gulf states, do as much to isolate the Kingdom as strengthen it. It must accept the fact that patience, the ability to listen, and a keen attention to the interests of its allies, are all the cost of meaningful alliances and partnerships. These are all areas where a strong, experienced U.S. ambassador can play a critical role in talking to the Saudi leadership, but only with the full support of the President and Secretaries of State and Defense.

If Ambassador Abizaid and the country team in Saudi Arabia have this support, they can work with USCENTCOM and key centers of U.S. power projection like the 5th fleet in Bahrain and the U.S. air base at Al Udaid in Qatar to serve a range of vital American interests in the region as well as those of each Arab strategic partner.

#### ****Dealing with Arab Failures: Creating a Unified Arab Gulf Approach to Deterring and Containing Iran****

Another key challenge that Abizaid faces is to find ways to work with the Saudi leadership to bring the Arab Gulf states together in dealing with Iran, and to stop offering Iran one opportunity after another to expand its interests in the region. While Iran is often accused of being aggressive in expanding its role and interests through the region, virtually every such Iran action simply exploited some Arab act of self-destructiveness, dysfunctional behavior, and lack of unity. Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, and the boycott of Qatar are all cases in point. To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, committing suicide is not an effective deterrent to being murdered.

There now are no easy ways to check Iranian influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, but unified U.S. and Arab Gulf action – where Saudi Arabia plays a lead role – could take the form of conditional aid plans to Syria and Yemen, a strong Saudi-led outreach to Iraq, Arab Gulf cooperation with Egypt and Jordan, unified pressure to limit Russian influence, and the steady emergence of an effective GCC-wide effort to deter and contain Iran.

This level of Arab cooperation will take years of effort to be effective, but it could accomplish a great deal over time. It would also allow the U.S. to properly support its Arab partners. The current divided Gulf Arab efforts to play the "game of thrones" make it impossible for the U.S. to implement a coherent U.S. regional strategy.

#### ****Dealing with Arab Failures: Using Gulf Arab Unity and Civil Aid, Not Arms Alone, as Leverage in Dealing with Other Arab States****

Ambassador Abizaid’s military background can give him added credibility in getting Saudi Arabia to take the lead in dealing with another key set of challenges. The U.S. military has made it clear in case after case that there is no purely military solution to dealing with the threat of extremism and the civil tensions and conflicts within regional states. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has the resources to provide a major set of aid incentives for outside Arab states to move forward in dealing with these problems.

One such step would be a GCC-wide offer of conditional aid to Iraq in both recovering from the impact of along chain of wars and in developing a more modern and diverse economy. It is pointless to demand that Iraq remain an Arab state if does not have a meaningful Arab alternative. Saudi Arabia has already taken some steps to reach out to Iraq and create this alternative, but a coordinated Gulf Arab aid plan – linked with U.S. and World Bank efforts – could be critical in allowing Iraq's new government to succeed, and recreating Iraq as a strong independent state and counterbalance to Iran.

A similar aid effort for Yemen – tied to clear conditions that require any new government to check internal conflict and ties to Iran – could help play a similar role. So, could Arab Gulf unity in supporting some meaningful peace plan and some form of government that bridges across Yemen's many current divisions.

Creating some form of credible government, redefining the role of the Houthis, and creating security along the Saudi border are critical issues but no ceasefire or "peace" can work that leaves Yemen's economy in a steadily deteriorating crisis. The "peace" can last that offers no real incentives for unity, and lacks any real effort to bring Shiites and Sunnis, north and south, and divided tribes together. As is the case with Iraq, and with the Sunni-Shi'ite divisions in Bahrain, any effort to rely on security solutions without matching civil solutions can only end in failure.

Similarly, U.S. Congressional efforts to cut off U.S. arms sales to pressure Saudi Arabia into halting the fighting – or just reduce civilian casualties – borders on the absurd. What happens next in a divided, violent, war shattered state that was an economic disaster area even before the fighting began? Even if such efforts could limit the killing zone, they now could not even have the "benefits" of turning Yemen into a quiet graveyard.

Progress in Syria will be a different kind of challenge. The U.S. and Arab Gulf must now find a civil way to win a war they have already effectively lost on the battlefield. However, a major Arab Gulf aid offer could offer an incentive for meaningful change, while being conditional enough to make it clear that Syria will receive no major post-civil war development or humanitarian aid from an Arab Gulf state or the U.S. as long as it is ruled with Assad's level of violence and repression, has a major Russian military presence, and is tied to Iran.

In Syria's case, the U.S. and Arab Gulf do need to cooperate in using "sticks" as well as offering "carrots." Peace negotiations are necessary, but no one in the U.S. or Arab Gulf can afford to forget the fact that the Assad of 2018 is even worse than the Assad of 2011-2012.

#### ****Correcting America's Mistakes: Making America’s Continuing Commitment to its Strategic Partners Clear****

At the same time, the problems in the Arab Gulf's approach to reform and security cooperation are only one of the causes of the region's problems. Ambassador Abizaid must also play a critical role in helping to correct five equally critical mistakes the United States makes in dealing with the Saudi Arabia and the region.

One key mistake, and one so serious that it affects every aspect of American’s strategic partnerships in the region, is its failure to demonstrate its continuing commitment to the Arab Gulf and other regional strategic partners. President Trumps hints that the U.S. should withdraw from the region and recent U.S. force cuts are only part of the story.

The lack of any clear U.S. plan to deal with the aftermath of Saddam’s fall when it invaded in 2003, and its blunders in dealing with Iraq, Syria, and Yemen under both President George W. Bush and President Obama has led many in the region to doubt America capability to lead, to support its Arab partners, and willingness to stay. The failure of both its new National Security Strategy and National Defense Plan to define any specific role for U.S. forces in the region have compounded the doubts of Arab governments, research centers, and media – as has the U.S. failure to response effectively to the growth of Russia’s role in Syria and China’s increasing economic influence.

Someone in the NSC, State, and OSD needs to have the courage to make it clear to the President that threats to leave do not increase U.S. leverage, and doubt increase allied doubts. Equally important, the U.S needs to define its future role in the Gulf region and in dealing with Iran in terms of specific commitments and force plans. It needs to make it clear that the U.S. will provide the forces necessary to force a real partnership and help its Gulf partners develop effective deterrent and defense capabilities. It needs to make it clear that its strategic interest still tie it firmly to its partners, that increases in U.S. power projection capabilities more than offset its post-IISS force reduction in the region, and that it is in the Gulf region stay.

This requires continuing Presidential leadership, clear plans and statement in the U.S. FY2020 budget submission of USCENTCOM testimony and statements, and continuing assurances from the Secretaries of State and Defense. It also requires the U.S. to actively consult with its Arab partners, and make it clear that it is willing to listen as well as to speak.

#### ****Correcting America's Mistakes: Focusing on the Civil Side of Arab Gulf Security and Stability****

Another key mistake is the U.S. failure to pay attention to the fact that the progress in the civil side of reform and stability operations in the Arab Gulf states is at least as critical as progress in the security and military side. The Saudi civil and economic "2030" reform plan is a key example. It is overambitious, oversimplified, undercosted, and sets unrealistic timelines. But, this has probably been true of every meaningful reform plan in history.

Success in creating jobs, modernizing and diversifying the economy, and making critical social reforms is absolutely critical to long term Saudi stability. Many aspects of the plan may be unrealistic, but there is nothing unrealistic about the problems it is intended to address. The failure to deal with them has been a key cause of the unrest throughout the MENA region since 2011, and has since fed the civil conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen.

Counterterrorism alone can never defeat extremism, and repression and effective security forces can never bring true stability. The U.S. needs to look beyond its current emphasis of military and counterterrorism forces, do everything possible to help Saudi Arabia make its reform plan work. This includes its call for real social reform, where success will be the best possible memorial to Khashoggi.

Above all, the United States needs to focus on helping Saudi Arabia create the economy it really needs, and not on increasing U.S. exports. It also needs to closely examine how the Saudi model or other models of reform can help bring stability to other Arab and MENA states. When it comes to lasting solutions, civil reform will be the key weapon against terrorism and extremism throughout the region.

#### ****Correcting America's Mistakes: Setting the Right Goals for an Arab Gulf Security Partnership****

The need to give priority to civil reform in the Arab Gulf also means, however, that Ambassador Abizaid must take the lead in helping President Trump deal with another key U.S. mistake. Someone needs to take the lead in showing the President just how badly his staff has informed him about the true nature of Saudi and other Gulf Arab burdensharing and arms sales.

First, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, and Oman are all reported to be spending something like 10% of their GPD on national security. This is five times the goal NATO sets for its member countries to eventually reach, and some three times the comparable exiting percentage figure for the U.S. It is also a level that the Arab Gulf states cannot afford to sustain, and that sharply restricts the money that they can spend on development and reform.

The Arab Gulf burden sharing problem is not that Gulf states are spending too little on security forces, it is that they are spending far too much. This is another key reason to cooperate in creating a Gulf Cooperation Council with high levels of interoperability and integration, and one where its forces are shaped to take advantage of U.S. British, and French power projection capabilities. The present nation-by-nation Arab Gulf force development efforts are grossly inefficient and focus far too much on prestige and high technology toys.

#### ****Correcting America's Mistakes: The Current High Levels of Arms Sales Do More Strategic Harm than Good****

Another area where Ambassador must deal with U.S. mistakes and problems is the recent U.S. emphasis on the sheer volume of U.S. arms sales to the Gulf. A strong U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia can be a key voice in persuading the President that focusing on high levels of U.S. arms sales does not really U.S. strategic interests. More U.S. arms sales often mean less in terms of regional stability and security.

What the U.S. needs from its Arab Gulf security partners is far more effective, interoperable, and integrated forces that can perform the right missions in deterring and defending against Iran and counterterrorism – not more revenues from selling them arms.

As noted earlier, the key immediate security priorities in the Arab Gulf are integrated missile/air defense, effective counterterrorism forces, and counters to Iran's steadily more capable mix of naval-missile-air threats to shipping in the Gulf, nearby waters, and the Red Sea. At present, each state tends to spend far more on poorly coordinated showpiece efforts than it would cost to fund a proper share of the forces that are really needed.

Even seen from the most selfish American perspective, the U.S. benefits far more from sound increases in Arab partner security forces, and being able to limit the forces it forward deploys, than it gains from selling arms the Arab Gulf states do not need. The cost-benefits to both the U.S. and its allies rise by an order of magnitude if more effective Arab Gulf forces deter even a relatively low-level conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

#### ****Correcting America's Mistakes: Looking Beyond “Sticks” and Focusing on “Carrots:” Giving Iran Clear Incentives to Change****

Finally, the United States and its Arab strategic partners are generally all too current in pointing out the threat caused by Iran’s growing strategic influence, the growth in its military forces and asymmetric threat, and the challenges created by the hardline elements in its regime. The fact that paranoids have real enemies does not, however, mean they have intelligent responses in dealing with them.

It is not enough for the U.S. to issue statements saying it is only trying to punish the Iranian regime and not the Iran people, and the rigid hostility of some Gulf Arab responses to Iran’s challenges are worse. The U.S does need to worth closely with its Arab partners to deter and defend against Iraq.

At the same time, leading figures like Ambassador Abizaid should be able to point to clear U.S. statements about what Iran needs to do to recue its military and security threats, and work with Arab partners to make it clear that if a future Iranian government actually complies, there will be a well-defined set of incentives the will allow its economy to develop, and plans to provide a far more stable security structure that will allow all sides to reduce their forces and security spending.

Such options may not create the pressures that will moderate Iran’s regime and change it conduct, put it is clear that rigid hardline positions – that have no clear options – so far reinforce Iran’s hardliners as well as make it hard to have any kind of productive regional dialogue and U.S.-Arab efforts that offer a clear alternative to those hardliners.

For a detailed analysis of Gulf security spending, burden sharing, arms transfers, and problems in military modernization, see Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance in the Gulf, September 4, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-military-spending-modernization-and-shifting-military-balance-gulf>.

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# The Khashoggi Tragedy and U.S. Strategic Interests in the Gulf: Finding the Right Solution

By Anthony H. Cordesman

October 22, 2018

It is hard to think of a more pointless tragedy than the Saudi murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Killing a decent man for making legitimate criticisms and justifiable calls for reform has wasted a meaningful life for no apparent reason and has done immense harm to U.S. and Saudi relations in the process. It has deeply compromised U.S. faith in Saudi Arabia's leadership in the worst possible way, and it threatens to divide the U.S. and Saudi Arabia at time when both nations need to improve their strategic cooperation to bring stability to the Gulf region and deal with Iran.

At this point, there is no way to avoid a long and painful effort to determine all the facts surrounding Khashoggi's death and establish the level of responsibility for all of the Saudis involved. Anything approaching a cover-up will simply create a climate of suspicion and distrust that will last for years. It is one thing to try to ignore some of the details in a failed operation against a violent terrorist or a hostile intelligence operative, but there is no way to make people forget what must be one of the most stupid and cruel intelligence blunders on record.

**Two Nations That Need Each Other**

At the same time, the United States and Saudi Arabia are not strategic partners by accident. Saudi development and stability are critical to the flow of petroleum exports from Saudi Arabia and from the entire Gulf – a flow of exports that is critical to the health of the global economy and to Asian states like Japan and South Korea that are some of America's most critical trading partners. These Saudi petroleum exports will become even more critical in a few weeks' time when new U.S. sanctions on Iran's petroleum exports kick in and added Saudi production becomes even more important.

Saudi military development is critical to deterring Iran and limiting its military adventures. The security of all the Arab Gulf states, not just Saudi Arabia, depends on the level and effectiveness of Saudi-U.S. military cooperation. It is far from clear that a hardline approach is the only way to deal with Iran, but if both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia remain committed to such an approach they need to be ready to cooperate.

It is equally true that Saudi Arabia needs outside help in economic and social reform. Saudi Arabia's current plans are almost certainly overambitious, but Saudi Arabia desperately does need to create massive numbers of jobs and diversify its economy, and cannot evolve peacefully and in a stable way without U.S. investment and help. Similarly, the U.S. cannot fight extremism and terrorism in the region without a stable Saudi Arabia and Saudi cooperation.

**What to Do Next: A Saudi Commitment to Reform**

Some of the current tragedy will have to play out on its own. The facts will either continue to surface at their own pace, or they will be buried in ways that leave lasting tension and distrust. Erdogan will play the Khashoggi card as best he can and will do so despite both his status as the world's least convincing human rights advocate and his clear motive for exploiting the situation as much as possible. And, it is easy to argue that the Saudi regime will be getting what it has earned.

The Saudi Foreign Minister has at least made a start, however, by describing Khashoggi's death as murder, and by saying that, "We are determined to find out all the facts and we are determined to punish those who are responsible for this murder. The individuals who did this did this outside the scope of their authority...There obviously was a tremendous mistake made, and what compounded the mistake was the attempt to try to cover up...Even the senior leadership of our intelligence service was not aware of this," he said, calling it a "rogue operation".

It may be impossible to prove that the Crown Prince was not involved, but heads of state have made such mistakes before and in the West. It also is at least something that both King Salman and the crown prince did call Khashoggi's son, Salah, on Sunday to express their condolences over his death. Formal compensation and formal acknowledgement of his fiancée would at least help.

One key step that could accomplish a great deal more than focusing on the ultimate responsibility for Khashoggi's death would be for Saudi Arabia to act on its own and announce a new approach to dealing with peaceful dissent. Saudi Arabia could announce greater freedom of the press and halt the arbitrary arrest of peaceful voices and demonstrations for reform. The Kingdom did far better with a lower-key approach to security and tolerating dissidents in the past, and it is difficult to see how the Kingdom can now champion reform from the top without letting reformers speak for themselves.

As for Saudi intelligence, security, counterterrorism, and law enforcement – the Kingdom could publicly make it clear that it will not carry out any similar attempts to suppress the voices of legitimate reform, free key prisoners, and agree that it would provide immediate transparency as to the cause and circumstance of any future cases of detentions and arrests. Some intelligence and counterterrorism activity must be kept classified, but the key to such efforts is to never label or treat anyone as a terrorist who is not actually violent or extreme.

The U.S. should not try to impose such steps, or expect Saudi Arabia to become a mirror image of the U.S., but these are key steps the Saudi government can take on its own. If it does, the U.S. should accept them for what they are: the best memorial Khashoggi could have.

**Ending the Boycott of Qatar and Restoring Efforts to Create an Effective Gulf Cooperation Council**

This would also be an excellent time for the U.S. and Kuwait to work with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to put an end to the absurd boycott of Qatar. This boycott has done a great deal to aid Iran and extremism, and has virtually halted any progress toward cooperation and military effectiveness within the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Gulf. This does not mean Saudi Arabia and the UAE conceding to Qatar. Qatar has already done much to deal with the legitimate complaints about its tolerance of real extremists but it does need do more. Al Jazeera would lose nothing by giving time to its real journalists and less time to panelists and biased propaganda segments.

One key step would be to find a GCC-wide compromise on an issue that Khashoggi faced against and again in recent years: treating the entire Muslim Brotherhood as if it was a terrorist or extremist organization. What is needed is a mutual agreement that will define real terrorists and extremists and only treat them as terrorists and extremists. Peaceful advocates of given variations of Islamic politics and governance should be treated as such, and these peaceful advocated should be given both security and the freedom to speak.

Equally important, the GCC desperately needs military reform. Progress has been needed for years in increasing interoperability, standardization, common facilities, and the integration of key systems like air defense, missile defense, maritime surveillance, etc. Here, many of the concepts advocated by the late King Abdullah have needed to be implemented from the very start of the GCC.

It would be far better for all the members of the GCC –and for other Arab states – if Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and other Gulf states could use this moment to work with USCENTCOM and NATO to make the GCC a real alliance rather than simply end the boycott with some new set of face-saving gestures.

**Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Arms Sales and Burden Sharing**

The U.S. reaction to Khashoggi also flags a different kind of need for change. Like President Obama before him, President Trump has been singularly badly advised about the value of U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states, and the role of Arab states in burden sharing. He has also focused on the values of arms sales as is they were real estate, rather than their value to the common defense and cost in terms of other aspects of Gulf and Saudi stability.

If anything, most Arab Gulf states need to cut their defense spending and focus on job creation, social services, and economic development to create the wealth and social stability that are key weapons against the threats of extremism and terrorism.

The U.S. asks NATO countries to spend 2% of their GDP on defense, and spent something like 3.6% of its own GDP on defense in 2017. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that Saudi Arabia spent 11.3% of its GDP on defense, Oman spent 12.08%, Iraq spent 10%, Kuwait spent 4.8%, and Bahrain spent 4.3% The UAE and Qatar do not provide meaningful spending data, but U.S. experts feel the UAE is spending some 10% and Qatar at least 7%.

(See Anthony H. Cordesman and Nicholas Harrington, Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance in the Gulf, September 4, 2018,CSIS-Burke Chair, https://www.google.com/search?q=Iran%3A+Military+Spending%2C+Modernization%2C+and+the+Shifting+Military+Balance+in+the+Gulf&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-1.)

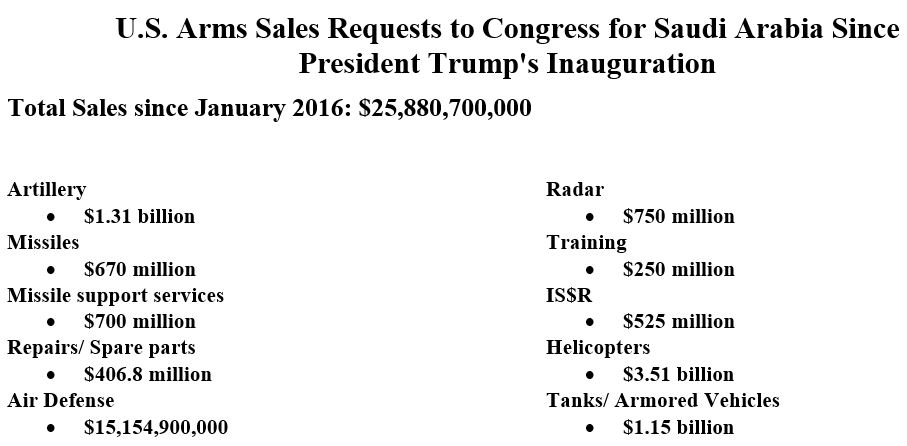
Gulf countries do need to have strong forces to deal with Iran and extremism, but most are already spending too much. They need to use this extra money to meet key civil needs, and they need to allocate their funds in ways where they achieve major benefits from cooperation rather than waste money on uncoordinated national efforts and showpiece projects.

President Trump is all too correct in flagging the need for strong regional strategic partners. He had been singularly badly advised, however, in focusing on the volume of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states rather than the need for stability, to cut back military spending, and to focusing on buying the right arms and setting the right priorities like THAAD and missile defense. As the attached fact sheet shows, even the sales request to Congress have only totaled some $25.9 billion since he came to office, but the previous totals under Obama have raised the recent totals to over $100 billion, which is simply too much.

It is far better to fight counterterrorism and avoid insurgency by ensuring that money is used to buy social stability and civil benefits than to spend excessively on military forces in ways that encourage it. The test of success in U.S. arms sales is that they enhance security and deterrence, and help limit escalation, not their dollar value. The key benefits come from creating more stable and effective strategic partners, not from taking as much of their money as possible. The cost to the U.S. of its recent wars also show that the real cost-benefits come from avoiding such wars if at all possible.

**The Yemen Crisis**

Finally, it is clear from Khashoggi's entire life that he must have understood the tragedy in Yemen all too well, and cared deeply about the human tragedy there. It is far from clear what solution exists to ending the fighting between the Saudi-UAE-led coalition and the Houthi-led coalition that opposes them, or to bringing broader stability to the tensions and fighting between North and South, Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its opposition, ISIS, and Yemen's other warring factions. A new Saudi humanitarian drive to aid the Yemeni people could help, however, and a new drive for peace might help even more. Nothing can bring Khashoggi back, but every action that serves the causes he lived for is at least a real tribute.



# The Other Side of the Khashoggi Tragedy

By Anthony H. Cordesman

October 15, 2018

It is hard at this point to believe that Saudi Arabia did not kill Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi and then try to make him disappear-- although it seems as likely that this was as much the result of a botched kidnapping or a too violent interrogation as a deliberate killing. It is equally hard to find any aspect of Khashoggi's life that justified even the kind of forced detention or interrogation that might have led to his unintentional death.  All the public data on him to date indicates that he stood for the same values that Americans tend to take for granted.

His ties to the Muslim Brotherhood do not seem to have involved any links to extremism. His criticisms of the Saudi government seem to have been limited to the kinds of reforms the Kingdom will eventually have to make. In fact, a more enlightened and pragmatic Saudi Crown Prince might have seen them as actually helping in the near term by acting as a counter weight to the hardline Saudi conservatives that challenge every step forward.

Allowing legitimate criticism is not simply a luxury for any government seeking true reform. It is a critical way of countering reactionaries, of building support for change, and learning what all the people – especially a nation's moderate elite – actually thinks.

**A Saudi Failure to Even Serve Its Own Narrow Security Interests**

Even if one could ignore issues like human rights and the rule of law, any Saudi government overreaction to Khashoggi failed to meet the most critical pragmatic tests that any national security action must meet: publicly repressing Khashoggi was unnecessary, counterproductive, and stupid. The human equivalent of "catch and release" would have been bad enough. Killing him deliberately or accidentally was truly idiotic. What could anyone in the Saudi royal court or intelligence possibly have expected the end result to be?

Even worse, MBS and the top levels of the Saudi government should already have learned the risks such repression poses to Saudi Arabia and their rule. The previous global reaction to Saudi hardline treatment of female protesters, the quiet anger among Western intelligence and security officials over the way Muhammed bin Nayef was dismissed, the reaction to the Saudi-UAE boycott of Qatar, the hotel arrests, and the growing problems over bombings in Yemen, should all have been warnings. Pointless overreaction creates far more hostility outside a country than it is worth, and even internally, it generally does more to alienate than successfully repress.

**But Turkey, to Put It Mildly, is No Better**

That said, some aspects of the U.S. and Western reactions to what seem to be serious Saudi mistakes have been dangerously ingenuous. The more one looks at Turkey's actions in dealing with Khashoggi, the more obvious it is that Turkey has managed to play a good part of the Western media.

First, this is the same Erdogan government that was described as follows in the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report issued in April 2018, and in ways that make it clear that Turkey was actively repressing far more people than Saudi Arabia.

The country experienced significant political challenges during the year. The continuing state of emergency–imposed following the July 2016 coup attempt, renewed once in 2016 and an additional four times during the year–had far-reaching effects on the country’s society and institutions, restricting the exercise of many fundamental freedoms. By year’s end authorities had dismissed or suspended more than 100,000 civil servants from their jobs, arrested or imprisoned more than 50,000 citizens, and closed more than 1,500 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on terrorism-related grounds since the coup attempt, primarily for alleged ties to cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, whom the government accused of masterminding the coup attempt.

The most significant human rights issues included alleged torture of detainees in official custody; allegations of forced disappearance; arbitrary arrest and detention under the state of emergency of tens of thousands, including members of parliament and two Turkish-national employees of the U.S. Mission to Turkey, for alleged ties to terrorist groups or peaceful legitimate speech; executive interference with independence of the judiciary, affecting the right to a fair trial and due process; political prisoners, including numerous elected officials; severe restriction of freedoms of expression and media, including imprisonment of scores of journalists, closing media outlets, and criminalization of criticism of government policies or officials; blocking websites and content; severe restriction of freedoms of assembly and association; interference with freedom of movement; and incidents of violence against LGBTI persons and other minorities. (https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm).

This is not a region where most governments hesitate to eliminate legitimate opposition elements, but the State Department scarcely implies that Turkey is falling behind in the comparative body count, or shown any more concern for its prisoners than Saudi Arabia seems to have shown for Khashoggi:

Human rights groups documented several suspicious deaths of detainees in official custody, although overall numbers varied. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT) reported at least 10 deaths in prison, including those of three children. The Human Rights Association (HRA) reported 17 deaths in prison. The Ministry of Justice, responding to questions from CHP member of parliament Baris Yardakas, reported that 66 prisoners committed suicide in 2016, 40 of them after the July 2016 attempted coup. For example, on August 3, Davut Turkel, a 59-year-old laborer and member of the AKCA-DER labor union, died in police custody. On July 13, police raided his home and detained him along with 90 others, reportedly as part of a Gulen-related investigation into the 2016 attempted coup. Following 12 days in detention, he was injured prior to appearing before a judge, transferred to a hospital, and died nine days later after falling into a coma. Police claimed he fell down on the courthouse steps and injured his head. A hospital autopsy confirmed the cause of death was a brain hemorrhage. Critics asserted the death was suspicious, in view of the fact that Turkel was at the courthouse with a two-person police escort when he sustained his injuries. (https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm).

Disappearances are no less common in Turkey than Saudi Arabia,

There were some unconfirmed reports of disappearances during the year, some of which human rights groups alleged were politically motivated. Opposition politicians and respected human rights groups claimed at least 11 abductions or disappearances of individuals with alleged Gulen ties or who opposed the government occurred. For example, in June the 12-year-old son of agricultural engineer Cemil Kocak witnessed the disappearance of his father in Ankara after their vehicle was hit by another car. When Kocak exited the car to assess the damage, three persons forced him into another car and drove away. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), there were “credible grounds” to believe Kocak and at least three other men had been forcibly disappeared by government agents. (https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm).

And when it comes to freedom of the press:

Many in media reported the government’s prosecution of journalists representing major independent newspapers and its jailing of scores of journalists during the preceding year hindered freedom of speech and that self-censorship was widespread amid fear that criticizing the government could prompt reprisals.

Hundreds of individuals, including journalists and minors, were indicted for insulting the president, prime minister, or state institutions. For example, on March 22, Ali Gul, an Istanbul law school student, was arrested and charged with insulting the president after he prepared a short video on social media regarding why Turks should vote “no” in the April constitutional referendum. He remained in jail for two months. In June the Ministry of Justice announced that in 2016 it had tried 3,658 persons on charges related to insulting the president. Comprehensive figures for the year were unavailable at year’s end.

Estimates of the number of journalists in jail varied. The Committee to Protect Journalists claimed that as of December 13, there were at least 81 journalists in prison. On December 6, the Journalists’ Union of Turkey claimed 149 journalists were in prison; Reporters without Borders reported that, as of October 24, there were more than 100 journalists in jail; the NGO Platform for Independent Journalism (P24) reported that, as of November 28, there were 153 journalists, editors, or media managers in jail, the vast majority for alleged ties to the PKK or the Gulen movement.

As of May, an estimated additional 123 journalists were outside the country and did not return due to fear of arrest, according to the Journalists Association. Hundreds more remained out of work after the government closed media outlets allegedly affiliated with the PKK or the Gulen movement as part of the previous year’s government response to the attempted coup. On July 20, the Radio and Television Supreme Board revoked the licenses of five television stations for broadcasting inappropriate content. Another television station and 12 radio stations that previously had their licenses revoked under a July 2016 decree faced difficulty seeking redress and were unable to appeal to the Commission of Inquiry on Practices under the State of Emergency, which was established to review appeals by individuals and associations.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals in many cases could not criticize the state or government publicly without risk of civil or criminal suits or investigation, and the government restricted expression by individuals sympathetic to some religious, political, or cultural viewpoints. At times many who wrote or spoke on sensitive topics or in ways critical of the government risked investigation.

... Nearly all private Kurdish-language newspapers, television channels, and radio stations remained closed on national security grounds under government decrees.

Government prosecution of independent journalists limited media freedom throughout the year. The pretrial detention since October 2016 of 20 prominent journalists, editors, and staffers of the country’s leading independent newspaper Cumhuriyet continued. Prosecutors alleged that material in the newspaper dating to 2014 aided a variety of terrorist organizations, including the PKK, the Gulen movement, and the leftist Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party or Front, and sought prison sentences ranging from seven and a one-half to 43 years. As of December 14, four employees remained in pretrial detention, some for more than 400 days. (https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm).

**Getting Played by Turkey????**

In fairness to both Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the same State Department Human Rights Report (https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm) shows they have plenty of company – both in the region and the world. It is business as usual for some members of Congress to ignore this fact, and the number of other cases affecting America's security partners in the world, but the U.S. has to operate in the world that actually exists and not the world that should exist. And here, it is a good idea for both the American media and American politicians to pause for a moment and consider the extent to which the Erdogan government just played them to its advantage.

Anyone who reviews the flood of articles and OP-EDs on Khashoggi is going to find ample evidence that far too many journalists, Western politicians, and analysts failed to publically note that Turkey's real motive for providing an immense amount of data was to attack Saudi Arabia's position and seek to undermine its influence relative to Turkey – as well as improve its own position in the United States.

Turkish media and voices with clear links to a government that is as repressive as the government in Saudi Arabia were rarely clearly identified having such links. Moreover, there was remarkably little coverage of the fact that Turkey was providing a level of surveillance and intelligence data on Saudi activity that could only come if Turkey was maintaining the kind of intelligence effort one only applies to a hostile power or was hoping use some form of Khashoggi incident for its own benefit.

Every article on Turkish sources and actions should have noted how unusual such a flood of sensitive data was, and how hypocritical any Erdogan government concern with human rights was, and the extent to which Erdogan maintains control over every aspect of Turkish government and media reporting. It should have highlighted the level of Turkey's interest in demonstrating Turkey's strategic importance to the U.S. and improving relations given its economic crisis and developments in Syria. It should have highlighted the probable reason why Turkey released Pastor Brunson after two years of treating him as a pawn. It should have highlighted Turkish-Saudi differences over influence in the Middle East, how to promote Sunni Islam, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, the Kurds, and Iraq.

**Giving the Khashoggi Case the Right Follow-Up**

Finally, again if the facts that have surfaced to date are right, the best memorial to Khashoggi is not going to be a narrow short-term focus on this case or any given country. What is needed as a memorial is a broader and lasting effort.

Doing long articles and media series on human rights that highlight a range of worst country cases and keep the pressure up over time is the best way to pressure a range of countries and warn states what will happen if they move to extremes. Avoiding focusing on any single country because they are in the headlines is another productive from of pressure. Letting sources create uncertain or false ties between a journalist and terrorism/extremism is a third. But, also honestly identifying journalists who are biased, ideologues, or for sale is equally critical.

One key lesson for all forms of media – and for think tanks and government reporting in countries lucky enough to be free – is to always identify the range of countries that suppress or attack freedom of speech and the press in a given case – not just the specifics of a single incident. Fully covering State Department, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International reporting on regional and the broader patterns of repression – rather than simply covering incidents as they occur – is another. Honestly explaining the real world nature of allies and partners in international relations, and the hard choices the U.S. sometimes has to make, is equally necessary.

A spasm of reporting on Khashoggi, and a flood of OP-EDs dumping on Saudi Arabia – followed by a lack of in depth coverage of the problem – is no memorial to someone who seems to have died for trying to speak the truth.

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# The Rise of Islamic Soft Power

## Religion and Foreign Policy in the Muslim World

*By*[*Peter Mandaville*](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/peter-mandaville)*and [Shadi Hamid](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/shadi-hamid" \o "More articles by Shadi Hamid), Foreign Affairs Magazine*

Islam has become a major, even obsessive, topic of public debate over the past two decades. From efforts by Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood to gain power through the ballot box to the violent radicalism of [the Islamic State](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tags/isis) (or ISIS), the dominant image of Islam in world politics has been that of a religious ideology pushed by nonstate actors who wish to see a more “Islamic” form of politics. But what about states themselves?

Conflicts between Middle Eastern governments often appear to be about hard power, and in many cases they are. Saudi Arabia is leading a [war in Yemen](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2017-10-16/yemens-humanitarian-nightmare) against the Houthis, which it views as a stand-in for Iranian expansion. But there is another side to most Muslim governments: they, too, use—and abuse—Islam for political ends.

In nearly every Muslim-majority country, Islam is an important—and sometimes the only—ideological currency that mixes effectively with more standard realpolitik. With the decline of both socialism and pan-Arabism in the Middle East, the only real ideological competition to Islam comes from nationalism. But nationalism, by definition, is difficult to promote outside one’s own nation. This means that governments—even relatively secular and progressive ones—have a powerful incentive to insert Islam into their foreign policy, using religious ideas to increase their prestige and promote their interests abroad—to deploy, in other words, what we call “Islamic soft power.”

Bottom of Form

There’s a catch, however. Once “Islam” is injected into public debates, how citizens interpret their religion is transformed from a private act of faith into a matter of national security. Governments feel compelled to directly involve themselves in debates around the nature of Islam or else risk leaving an ideological vacuum for domestic challengers to fill. In other words, internal disagreements over Islam’s role and relevance in everyday politics shape how states use Islam abroad.

*Once “Islam” is injected into public debates, how citizens interpret their religion is transformed from a private act of faith into a matter of national security.*

#### STATIST ISLAM

In one sense, the use of Islamic soft power is nothing new. Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has invested billions of dollars to fund mosque building, the dissemination of (often controversial) religious texts, and scholarships to study in Saudi religious universities. The export of the Saudis’ ultraconservative version of Islam has been driven by the royal family’s and the religious establishment’s sense of obligation to spread Islam, but it has also served a geopolitical purpose, allowing Saudi Arabia to contrast itself and compete with regional rivals, such as Egypt under the secular-nationalist President [Gamal Abdel Nasser](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2018-08-14/muslim-brothers) or Iran after 1979. Tehran has similarly used Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary brand of Shiite Islam to portray itself throughout the Muslim world as an anti-imperialist Islamist power.

Since the Arab revolts of 2011, however, Islamic soft power has emerged as an increasingly important part of a new geopolitics of religion, as we discuss in a [recent report](https://www.brookings.edu/research/islam-as-statecraft-how-governments-use-religion-in-foreign-policy/). To an even greater extent than in the past, today’s Muslim governments are attempting to shape religious discourse and control religious knowledge in order to pursue their own national interests.

Take the October [assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-11-05/why-us-cant-control-mbs) by Saudi agents in Istanbul, which provided the odd spectacle of a rigidly Islamist regime killing a writer it accused of being an Islamist. Today, Saudi Arabia opposes a particular kind of Islamism—that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet decades ago, Saudi Arabia was only too happy to provide sanctuary and jobs for members of the Muslim Brotherhood, outsourcing aspects of its vast proselytization apparatus to affiliates of the Islamist movement. Exiled Brotherhood figures were given faculty positions in Saudi universities, and many populated the senior tiers of Saudi-funded international religious organizations, such as the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. But after the 2011 revolutions, when Brotherhood-affiliated political parties won elections in Egypt and Tunisia, royal families in the Gulf increasingly came to see the movement as an existential threat to their regimes’ survival.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates now label the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Fearing that the group’s mix of religious piety and organizational skill will allow it to appeal to their populations, they warn of the dangers of Islamism. Yet the anti-Islamists are just as likely as the Islamists to mix religion and politics—only in a different way.

Anti-Brotherhood governments are aggressively trying to assert control over religious institutions and promote what might be called “statist Islam”—a version of the religion that is, above all, subservient to the interests of the state. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has called on Al-Azhar University to update and modernize its approach to Islamic sources as part of a wider "[religious revolution](https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/06/africa/egypt-president-speech/)" that can counter both the oppositional Islam of the Brotherhood and the violent, extremist Islam of ISIS and al Qaeda. And Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) pledged in 2017 to return Saudi Arabia to a tradition of “moderate Islam” that he claimed was once prevalent in the kingdom. He has curbed the influence of Saudi Arabia’s religious police, taking away their authority to make arrests, and issued harsh sentences against independent religious figures such as Sheik Salman al-Awda, a hugely popular cleric with a Brotherhood-friendly streak. Whereas previous Saudi monarchs and senior royals have always allowed for at least some give-and-take with the country’s religious establishment, MbS has made it clear that for him, moderate Islam is not just about rejecting ISIS but about promoting deference to existing political authorities.

The other two Gulf powerhouses, Qatar and the UAE, have also developed distinctive approaches to supporting and promoting religion abroad. Qatar has positioned itself as a patron of Muslim Brotherhood–style Islamism, providing—much to the chagrin of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi—a sanctuary for Islamist dissidents and hosting a range of broadly pro-Brotherhood media outlets. The UAE, meanwhile, has quietly emerged in the past decade as the chief patron of a number of major Sufi scholars and has funded high-profile conferences that bring together not only Muslim leaders from across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East but Christian and Jewish leaders from Europe and the United States, too. A major theme of these conferences is religious pluralism, but it is a quietist pluralism that does not challenge the state.

#### ISLAM AND THE LIBERAL ORDER

For the United States and other Western powers, the realities of Islamic soft power complicate attempts to understand Muslim-majority allies. Washington should recognize, first, that internal competition over the role of Islam and Islamism cannot be contained within a country’s borders and that the foreign policies of authoritarian allies are not—and cannot be—insulated from intra-Islamic struggles at home. This means that even for U.S. officials with little interest in human rights, there remain important reasons—along strictly “national interest” lines—to pay close attention to how regimes suppress their domestic opponents. Human rights abuses cannot be bracketed as a matter for naive idealists not schooled in the hard realities of realpolitik.

Various U.S. administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, have picked up some bad habits when it comes to embracing religious actors that their Arab allies tout as solutions to religious extremism. Like the UAE, Jordan and Morocco have also positioned themselves as champions of “moderate Islam,” a supposed antidote to religious extremism. Western governments have lauded their sponsorship of interfaith summits and the creation of training centers for religious leaders—even as the jury remains out on the [effectiveness](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/01/middle-east-regimes-are-using-moderate-islam-to-stay-in-power/?utm_term=.913217867dcc) of these initiatives. After all, the religious institutions involved are often viewed by populations in the region as mouthpieces of the very governments they despise. These are hardly credible voices.

Winning hearts and minds, however, is not necessarily the point. The use of Islamic soft power is meant to serve governments more than it serves Muslim publics. Almost without exception today, those vying for dominance in the Middle East have embraced various forms of religious outreach in their regional strategies. For instance, Saudi Arabia’s paranoia around Iran’s assertiveness across the region has led Riyadh to encourage, or at least turn a blind eye to, virulent and at times violent anti-Shiite sentiment from Saudi and Saudi-linked preachers, particularly in countries, such as Lebanon and Iraq, where Tehran has a strong presence. On the one hand, these clerics are engaging in a full-throated condemnation of what they genuinely view as heresy; on the other hand, their expressions of faith serve the agenda of a Saudi state that views Shiism as an avatar of Tehran.

Iran, for its part, has sought to stoke sectarian tensions in countries such as Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon, where Shiite populations experience discrimination and disenfranchisement. Iran cannot afford to engage in outright anti-Sunni agitation, which would alienate the vast majority of Muslims. Instead, Tehran draws on symbols of Shiite persecution from Islamic history in an attempt to equate incumbent Sunni regimes with the anti-Shiite perpetrators of the past. In each of these examples, geopolitics and Islam are inextricably intertwined, so much so that it is hard to know where the former ends and the latter begins.

Although Islam has always been present in the region’s politics, its importance has grown in recent years—thanks not only to the convulsions of the Arab Spring but to decisions made in Washington. U.S. President Donald Trump, like his predecessor, Barack Obama, has tried to disengage from the daily irritations of Middle East politics and hand over more responsibility to Arab allies. This has encouraged these allies—particularly Saudi Arabia—to adopt more aggressive foreign policies, which has in turn required an ideological language for sustaining that aggression. Islamic soft power, whether in the form of anti-Shiism or “moderate Islam,” offers just that.

More broadly, a shift is taking place around the world as doubts build about the future of liberalism and the U.S.-led “liberal international order.” With the global consensus around liberalism fraying, more space is opening up for ideological combat. If the United States continues to withdraw from its role in promoting a predictable world order, competition around Islam—who defines it, who speaks for it, and who gets to mobilize it for their own ends—looks likely only to intensify.

# Why the U.S. Can’t Control MBS

## Reining in the Rogue Prince

*By [Madawi al-Rasheed](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/madawi-al-rasheed" \o "More articles by Madawi al-Rasheed), Foreign Affairs*

The murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2 has damaged the [Saudi regime’s](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-10-18/recklessness-of-mohammed-bin-salmans-saudi-arabia?cid=int-fnd&pgtype=hpg) image and credibility worldwide. Partners of Saudi Arabia that have always cherished their close relationships with the regime and refrained from overtly criticizing its domestic repression, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have spoken out in the aftermath of the murder and demanded a clear and honest investigation.

The detention and even elimination of dissidents and critics is nothing new in Saudi Arabia. But Khashoggi’s murder has shone a spotlight on the excesses of an increasingly authoritarian regime. In the past, individual Saudi rulers were at least partially constrained by a system of power sharing in which different princes controlled different influential branches of government and the sovereign was accountable to all of them. But King Salman swept away this model when he came to power in 2015 and propelled his son [Mohammed bin Salman (MbS)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-03-19/fresh-prince?cid=int-fnd&pgtype=hpg)to the top position in the kingdom as crown prince. The Saudi monarchy has been transformed from one that rules by royal consensus to one in which a single individual holds absolute power.

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Khashoggi’s murder apparently demonstrates such power wielded to its ugliest extreme. The incident poses a serious new challenge to Saudi Arabia’s allies and partners—especially the United States. With the rest of the royal family and the Saudi public completely marginalized, the United States is the only remaining actor with enough influence to restrain MbS. To do so, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump would have to reconsider the foundations of U.S. diplomacy with Saudi Arabia. Given Trump’s noncommittal response to the Khashoggi affair thus far, this prospect is unlikely.

THE TOTALITARIAN TURN

At the heart of the present crisis in Saudi Arabia is the question of succession. In the past, the Saudi regime consisted of multiple fiefdoms, with different senior princes in charge of influential ministries. The monarch was the head of the state and also the head of his royal kin. This arrangement occasionally resulted in friction among princes, but overall it served to restrain the power of the monarch, who was forced to consult with his brothers about major issues. The king was effectively the first among equals, with a degree of balance prevailing among the different factions of the House of Saud.

King Abdullah (1924–2015) was the last monarch to rule under this arrangement. Like other kings before him, he recognized that he would not be able to rule the kingdom effectively if he overlooked his senior brothers or acted against their will. In a bizarre coincidence, King Abdullah became the first king to witness the death of both of his crown princes: first his half brother Prince Sultan in 2011 and then his full brother Prince Nayef in 2012. While both of his crown princes were ill, King Abdullah invented a new position—that of deputy crown prince—in order to militate against a power vacuum. He appointed his half brother Prince Salman to that position, and Salman became king when Abdullah died in 2015. In 2007, King Abdullah established the Allegiance Commission, consisting of 35 senior princes and their sons, to oversee the succession should he or the crown prince die.

King Salman has since shattered the family’s cherished power-sharing arrangement. He was able to do so because of the demographic makeup of the royal household. Most of the king’s brothers had died by the time he took power, allowing him to sidestep his own surviving eligible brothers and even senior nephews. Only one of the king’s brothers, Prince Ahmad, was an option for crown prince. But because of his marginality (he had never held a senior position in government for any extended period of time), and King Salman’s strong desire to ensure that only his own offspring would inherit the crown, he decided to ignore Prince Ahmad, too. Within months of becoming king, Salman sacked Crown Prince Muqrin; he then deposed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in 2017 and chose not to appoint a deputy crown prince. In making the appointment, King Salman ignored the Allegiance Commission. All of these measures cleared the way for his son’s rise to power.

Saudi Arabia has effectively transformed into a totalitarian regime in which all of the power of the state is concentrated in one person's hands.

No prince before MbS has held so many positions of authority at such a young age. In addition to being crown prince, he is deputy prime minister, minister of defense, chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, and chairman of the Council of Political and Security Affairs. He is the head of Aramco, the state-owned oil and natural gas company. The young prince also controls the Saudi state’s instruments of soft power, such as the newly created Entertainment Commission. Saudi Arabia has effectively transformed into a totalitarian regime in which all of the power of the state is concentrated in one person’s hands.

MbS has blocked the few channels by which the Saudi public and royal family were once able to influence policy. The Allegiance Commission dissolved after several of its members were detained in the so-called anticorruption crackdown in 2017. MbS has disbanded the royal assembly, marginalized the religious establishment, and detained critics as well as financial elites.

The crown prince has imposed policies from the top down, without giving the Saudi people the opportunity to debate, let alone criticize, them: for example, lifting the ban on women driving and promoting pop culture and entertainment. These are cosmetic reforms masquerading as substantive ones, and they are meant to be a popular alternative to political reform. They are also designed to distract Saudis from worsening repression, particularly the suppression of critical voices and the silencing of debate in the public sphere. Even the other members of the royal family are disenfranchised. The new Saudi totalitarianism, which requires complete subservience and loyalty to the crown prince, has culminated in the scandal of Khashoggi’s murder.

KINGS AND PRESIDENTS

With no one able to restrain MbS from the inside, he must be restrained from the outside. The United States is the only power capable of exerting the necessary pressure. The United States is the main guarantor of the security of the Saudi regime. It sells more arms to Saudi Arabia than any other Western country. In Washington, Saudi Arabia is still considered a strategic partner (albeit an embarrassing one, from the perspective of the American public and media). The United States treats the kingdom as an important ally in the fight against terrorism, a player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a check on Iran’s rising influence in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the United States’ relationship with Saudi Arabia is based entirely on personal relationships between leaders rather than diplomatic norms. These relationships are getting in the way of effective U.S. policy toward the crown prince.

The heavily personalistic relationships between American presidents and Saudi kings dates back to 1945, when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with King Abdulaziz ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal. This encounter led to the establishment of the first military base in the kingdom, where U.S. oil companies had maintained interests since 1933. Oil tightened the bond between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and the latter’s strategic location was important for U.S. military operations in Asia. These common interests laid the foundation on which future leaders of the two countries would conduct diplomacy.

Since that meeting, the United States has viewed its foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia as contingent upon having the right royal with whom to do business. From 1983 to 2005, that person was Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to the United States. He was recalled to Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, when the United States discovered that 15 of the hijackers were Saudi Arabian and it became very difficult to defend the kingdom. Princes Turki al-Faisal and Adel al-Jubeir, who succeeded him as ambassador, were unable to satisfy Washington’s desire for a Saudi interlocutor who was both close to the throne and loyal to U.S. interests. Prince Turki was sent to Washington as part of a charm offensive to defuse the tension with the United States immediately after 9/11, but he was critical of U.S. policy on major issues, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was also very critical of former U.S. President Barack Obama’s positive assessment of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Prince Turki argued that Iran, rather than domestic politics or democratic deficits, posed the greatest threat to both Saudi Arabia and the region. These tensions were further strained after the United States and other Western countries signed the Iran nuclear deal in 2013 without Saudi Arabia’s involvement, following secret negotiations in Oman.

When MbS came to power, he dispatched his own brother Khalid bin Salman to Washington as the new ambassador. While one brother ruled in Riyadh, the other had the ears of Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in an arrangement that more closely resembled a family affair than diplomacy between two sovereign states. Unfortunately, such personal relationships seem to have distracted foreign policy actors in Washington from the hard work of critically evaluating the changing priorities and national interests of the two countries.

The diplomatic relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is further complicated by the fact that the kingdom completely lacks healthy institutions, such as an elected government, a functioning parliament, and an independent judiciary, which could have helped diffuse power and check the absolute rule of the monarchy. Notably, the United States has never used its influence to pressure its ally to create such institutions. Princes are the only conduit by which the United States knows how to deal with Saudi Arabia, and no normal diplomatic measures exist for holding a rogue prince accountable. The United States may choose to treat Saudi Arabia’s newly naked totalitarianism as a merely unfortunate or embarrassing development in one of its most cherished relationships, even after Khashoggi’s murder.

Princes are the only conduit by which the United States knows how to deal with Saudi Arabia.

When Khashoggi was murdered, Trump oscillated between condemning the crime and searching for an out for MbS by hinting that the murder could be the work of “rogue elements” within the state. But in a totalitarian regime in which all power is concentrated in the hands of one person, it is simply not believable that the responsibility for such an act could fall on the shoulders of anyone other than the crown prince. Trump’s statements demonstrate a complete lack of serious scrutiny of Saudi power and command structures. From his perspective, the merit of the U.S.-Saudi partnership is beyond serious reconsideration.

ROGUE PRINCE

Going forward, Saudis will need to find a way to reinsert themselves into the politics of their own country. Under MbS, with all religious, financial, and royal elites silenced, Saudis are now ruled primarily by fear. The murder of Khashoggi has focused their attention on just how far the regime will go in pursuit of absolute power. Consequently, they are looking to the global community to restrain the dangerous crown prince.

The United States could start by making its support for MbS conditional on his recognition of people’s freedoms and the rule of law. This would help restrain a young power-grabbing prince who has so far displayed zero respect for the international community and has severely violated diplomatic trust, especially with Turkey.

But if Khashoggi’s murder ends in nothing but business as usual from the United States, this will not be the last horrific act we see. An indifferent response will send a clear message from the United States to MbS: the young crown prince can get away with murder.

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# Saudi Arabia’s Empty Oil Threats

Riyadh Won’t Sabotage Trump’s Iran Policy

By [Andrew Miller](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/andrew-miller) and [Sahar Nowrouzzadeh](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/sahar-nowrouzzadeh), foreign affairs

The brazen murder of Washington Post journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi has elicited that rarest of reactions in contemporary U.S. politics: bipartisan consensus. Both Republicans and Democrats in the House and the Senate have condemned Saudi Arabia for the [assassination operation](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-10-18/recklessness-of-mohammed-bin-salmans-saudi-arabia?cid=int-fnd&pgtype=hpg) in Istanbul, with the ever-colorful Lindsey Graham [urging](https://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/senate/411590-graham-pledges-to-sanction-to-hell-out-of-saudi-arabia-over-missing) that the United States “sanction the hell out of” the Saudi government.

President Trump’s administration, however, has adopted a notably restrained response thus far: it is considering sanctioning the low-level operatives who carried out the killing but has given little indication that it will hold Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Salman](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-03-19/fresh-prince?cid=int-fnd&pgtype=hpg) personally responsible. One explanation for this reticence is that the administration fears that punitive steps could complicate its Iran policy. Senior administration officials, including [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/10/286716.htm) and [Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-treasury-secretary-mnuchin-heads-to-saudi-arabia-to-solidify-anti-iran-alliance-1540122174), have alluded to such concerns when pressed on the Khashoggi case.

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Administration officials [reportedly](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/us/politics/khashoggi-trump-iran-sanctions.html" \t "_blank)worry that by applying too much pressure on the kingdom, they could inadvertently “jeopardize plans to enlist Saudi help to avoid disrupting the oil market.” The Trump administration has been counting on Saudi Arabia, as the world’s swing producer, to increase its oil production to help offset the anticipated loss of Iranian supply come November 5, when sanctions lifted under the Iran nuclear deal are re-imposed.

Khashoggi's murder has elicited that rarest of reactions in contemporary U.S. politics: bipartisan consensus.

U.S. officials reportedly fear that an offended Saudi Arabia could undermine this plan by refusing to increase its oil production—or even cutting production (to spite its face). Such action would likely cause a dramatic spike in global oil prices. The American people would be forced to pay more for fuel; European countries displeased with the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal would have further incentive to subvert sanctions; and Iran would enjoy greater revenues from whatever oil it could still sell. This chain of events would pose a fundamental challenge to President Trump’s entire plan for confronting Iran, of which a key component is ramping up economic pressure in an attempt to alter Tehran’s policies.

Elements of the Saudi monarchy are well aware of the administration’s fixation on Iran and seem to want to stoke these fears. In an [October 14 statement](https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/15/saudi-statement-sparks-concern-the-kingdom-will-weaponize-oil.html), the official Saudi Press Agency alluded to the so-called “oil weapon,” reminding the United States that “the kingdom’s economy has an influential and vital role in the global economy.” The general manager of the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news network went even further, [threatening](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/10/14/OPINION-US-sanctions-on-Riyadh-means-Washington-is-stabbing-itself.html) that the kingdom would reconcile with Iran in response to U.S. pressure and warning, “If the price of oil reaching $80 angered President Trump, no one should rule out the price jumping to $100, or $200, or even double that figure.”

While Saudi Arabia does have the ability to impose costs on the United States if it is displeased by forceful action on the Khashoggi affair, Saudi threats to sabotage President Trump’s Iran policy through manipulating the oil market do not appear credible, for two primary reasons. First, Riyadh has been acutely sensitive to the potential danger posed by its larger Persian Gulf neighbor for decades, and the Saudi leadership has increasingly indicated that it perceives Iran as an existential threat. Bin Salman has spoken of Iran in [stark terms](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/), likening the Islamic Republic to Hitler and accusing it of following an “extremist ideology.”

Indeed, the crown prince has emphasized the urgency of the putative Iranian threat, [saying](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html?login=email&auth=login-email), “We are a primary target for the Iranian regime,” and suggesting that the kingdom “won’t wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia.” Bin Salman’s fixation on Iran is also evident in his destructive bombing campaign against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian disaster and [costs](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/10/10/after-khashoggi-us-arms-sales-to-the-saudis-are-essential-leverage/)Saudi Arabia at least $50 billion per year. The crown prince appears intent on continuing that war until Iranian influence is not just minimized or contained but, as he [reportedly told](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east) former Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken, completely “eradicated.”

Saudi Arabia has spent years encouraging Washington to take more aggressive action against Iran, including reportedly [urging](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/15/dont-let-israel-and-saudi-arabia-drag-the-u-s-into-another-war/) then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to initiate military action against Tehran in 2010. Saudi support for the Trump administration’s Iran campaign is not a favor to the United States but a reflection of Riyadh’s own authentic anxiety regarding Iranian intentions. Saudi Arabia is therefore highly unlikely to take any step that would deliberately relieve pressure on Tehran and disrupt the kingdom’s partnership with the Trump administration to counter its regional rival.

Although Saudi Arabia’s use of the “oil weapon” would indeed cause short-term harm to the U.S. and global economy, it would ultimately do more harm to the Saudi economy.

The economic logic for Saudi intransigence is equally unconvincing. Although Saudi Arabia’s use of the “oil weapon” would indeed cause short-term harm to the U.S. and global economies, it would ultimately do more harm to the Saudi economy in the medium to long term. The reason for this is not that the United States has achieved energy independence but that Saudi influence over the global oil market has been in steady decline. A major increase in the price of oil would lead higher-cost producers of energy, such as frackers and the alternative energy industry, to take advantage of a more favorable market by producing more fuel. The net effect would be to drive oil prices back down, while at the same time robbing Saudi Arabia of market share.

Simply put, Saudi Arabia would end up selling less oil at close to present prices, which means it would lose revenue. The kingdom is already suffering lower than expected revenues, such that it has been forced to scale back services and benefits for its burgeoning young population. With public debt surpassing 20 percent, Saudi Arabia can ill afford to sacrifice additional oil-based revenue.

Even if Saudi Arabia were self-destructive enough to behave as the Trump administration fears, the impact on Washington’s sanctions policy might not be as dramatic as anticipated. Putting significant additional pressure on Iran does not require every major purchaser of Iranian oil to reduce its imports to zero or near zero. When the Obama administration implemented similar sanctions in the 2012–15 period, many countries zeroed out their imports, but others gradually reduced purchases over time, based on oil supply projections. Nonetheless, Iran’s exports of crude oil and lease condensate dropped to their [lowest levels](https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=11011) in decades, and the Islamic Republic lost billions of dollars in revenues.

The administration’s goal of zeroing out Iranian oil exports was always an ambitious one and unlikely to come to fruition by the November deadline, particularly given that the United States is currently relatively isolated on Iran. The United States may even face a point of diminishing economic and political returns if it pushes its allies too far in this context. Already, the E.U., Russia, and China have united in an unprecedented manner with the intention of skirtingU.S. secondary sanctions. The effectiveness of that effort remains to be seen.

The Trump administration’s Iran policy is indeed in danger of failing, but not because of Saudi Arabia’s oil production levels. The policy’s prospects depend much more on the very allies, in Europe and the P5+1, that the administration has alienated through its unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, despite Iran’s continued [verified](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-is-complying-with-nuclear-deal-restrictions-iaea-report-idUSKCN1LF1KR) compliance with its terms. To shift Iran’s dynamic and complex strategic calculus has historically required that the United States and its allies present a sustained, united front. This will be particularly crucial in regard to the Iranian [policies](https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm) that the administration aims to change.

The Trump administration’s Iran policy is in danger of failing, but not because of Saudi Arabia’s oil production levels.

But the Trump administration has given Iran the strategic advantage by fracturing this unity, relying instead on unilateral threats and pressure, while failing to offer a viable path for diplomacy. Washington’s approach has fed the perception among Iran’s leaders that the United States is intent on pursuing regime change. Inflaming Iranian threat perceptions has unhelpfully foreclosed valuable bargaining space, making it even more difficult for the United States to offer the sorts of credible assurances that might secure concessions.

It would be a strategic miscalculation for the United States to absolve the Saudi leadership of responsibility for Khashoggi’s murder, especially if it did so in order to avert retaliation on its Iran policy. Such retaliation is unlikely and would in any case be manageable. But the outcome of the Khashoggi affair is in fact very relevant to U.S. Iran policy—perhaps just not in the way senior U.S. officials seem to believe.

As Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis recently [stated](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/mattis-says-murder-saudi-journalist-jamal-khashoggi-threatens-stability-region-n925196) in reference to Khashoggi’s murder, “Failure of any one nation to adhere to international norms and the rule of law undermines regional stability at a time when it is needed most.” In the past, demonstrating that it is Iran that is defying international norms has been important to mobilizing international pressure against the Islamic Republic. To the extent that U.S. allies appear to act in a manner similar to Iran—but without meaningful reproach—the task of containing Iranian threats to U.S. interests, and speaking credibly in support of those facing injustice inside Iran, will be all the more difficult.

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# Not His Father’s Saudi Arabia

The Khashoggi Affair Reveals the Recklessness of MBS

By [Daniel Benjamin](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/daniel-benjamin), foreign affairs

Since the murder of the Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/wait-and-see-amid-global-outrage-over-khashoggi-trump-tries-to-protect-saudis/2018/10/17/213c2072-d235-11e8-8c22-fa2ef74bd6d6_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_trumpkhashoggi741pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory-ans), a rapt global audience has followed in real time a spectacle usually reserved for the most senior levels of government: the fashioning of an exculpatory fig leaf for an atrocity.

That work is almost done. Saudi Arabia appears on the verge of getting its story straight, about how an interrogation went horribly wrong but had nothing to do with [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-03-19/fresh-prince), known as MbS. U.S. President Donald Trump has nearly nailed down a pretext for continuing to sell arms to Riyadh and maintaining the close embrace of the Saudi leadership. Turkey may yet get an infusion of cash for its ailing economy in return for locking away damning evidence of the murder in the Istanbul consulate. But however loud the protestations of innocence, only the most willfully blind could believe that the man who effectively rules Saudi Arabia did not authorize the operation that cost Khashoggi his life.

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The botched rendition—if that is what it was—has elicited justified moral outrage. It has also made the need to reassess the US-Saudi relationship urgent and unavoidable. MbS, the 33-year-old who was named heir to the Saudi throne just two years ago and depicted as an ambitious reformer, has in short order transformed his government’smodus operandi at home, but especially abroad, from deeply ingrained caution to brutal impetuousness. In so doing, he has evinced a recklessness that is deeply at odds with U.S. interests.

Consider the distance traveled from the Saudi royal family’s traditional prudence: before the death of King Abdullah, predecessor of the reigning, if none too vigorous King Salman, it was scarcely imaginable that the Saudi armed forces would go into action. The high-water mark of Saudi deployments since the 1990 Gulf War was the dispatch of 1000 troops to Bahrain in 2011, as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mission to help the government put down Arab Spring protests. The kingdom had an appetite for multi-billion-dollar arms sales, but not for a truly capable army; the open secret was that the Al Saud preferred a “coup-proof” force. But this calculus has changed. Since 2015, the Saudi military has been bogged down in a ruinous conflict in Yemen, against Houthi rebels and their tribal allies who now control Sanaa.

For those who had worked with the Saudis on security issues in the past, the move into Yemen clearly telegraphed: This is not your father’s Saudi Arabia. Similarly disturbing was the abrupt disappearance of a man who had been a linchpin of U.S.-Saudi cooperation, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. As interior minister and in a variety of other jobs, MbN, as he is known, had been the chief of Saudi counterterrorism and was widely viewed as the United States’ best friend in the kingdom. Under MbN, Saudi cooperation on this issue became increasingly valuable—to the point where it could be argued that it was more important to the bilateral relationship than Saudi help on maintaining stable oil prices. On more than one occasion, MbN’s work saved American lives. When Salman became king, MbN was first named deputy crown prince and later crown prince.

In 2017, Salman shunted him aside and made his son Mohammed heir. According to some reports, MbN is under house arrest, and many of his top aides have been fired. When asked about MbN today, U.S. officials speak darkly of his situation and bemoan the fact that in the era of the bromance between presidential senior advisor Jared Kushner and MbS, no one dares utter MbN’s name. The days of cozy retirements for royal also-rans appear to be over.

So, too, are the days of some minimal comity with neighbors in the Gulf. Friction between the Al Saud and the Al Thani who rule Qatar goes back decades, but past clashes have repeatedly subsided, with the United States occasionally tamping down tensions to keep some semblance of unity in the GCC. Last May, however, the Saudi government blockaded Qatar. Joined by several other Sunni powers—and egged on in particular by the United Arab Emirates—Riyadh sought to push Qatar to the breaking point and even seemed to back a renegade member of the Al Thani as a replacement for the emir.

Saudi Arabia and its partners issued an ultimatum with 13 demands—including requirements such as shuttering Al Jazeera, terminating construction of a Turkish air base, and downgrading relations with Iran, co-owner with Qatar of the world’s largest natural gas field — that no sovereign ruler could have accepted. MbS and his advisers seem not to have contemplated a flat rejection by Doha. When it came, Riyadh had no Plan B. The countries have been locked in a bizarre standoff ever since.

Which brings us to l’affaire Khashoggi. Mortification at the thought of things going wrong had been an important constraint on Saudi behavior for decades. The operation that went awry in Istanbul was of a kind that much bolder countries, with more practiced intelligence services, would rarely even consider. To be sure, there is a long Saudi history of torture—a big reason why to this day the United States has no extradition treaty with the kingdom—but not one of international rendition or assassination. Before Khashoggi, these were not undertakings one could ever imagine the Saudis attempting.

Some may argue that such recklessness simply manifests the growing pains of a new Saudi Arabia—one that will reform, diversify its economy, and shed its habitual low profile in international affairs to become a more effective, decisive player. But the evidence—including the brief and stunning hostage taking of the Lebanese prime minister and the quarrel with Canada over human rights—suggests there is no growth going on here. There is only heedlessness and overweening ambition.

For the United States, the costs of abetting Mohammed bin Salman are growing. The blockade of Qatar threatens to destroy what is left of the GCC, which Washington has long supported as a bulwark of stability in the region. The United States has an airbase—the largest in the region and the focal point for the fight against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS)—in Qatar, and thus in a country cut off from Washington’s neighboring partners. This is problematic, to say the least: U.S. commanders complain that long-range planning is exceedingly difficult. The political disarray in the region also undermines U.S. efforts to maintain a united front to contain Iran. Even if one believes that the Trump administration has taken an overly hostile, provocative approach to the Islamic Republic—and moved too close to the Saudi posture of confrontation—squabbling partners are not helpful for advancing U.S. goals in the region.

The fighting in Yemen has spawned worse demons. Remote and underreported, the war in Yemen has become in the minds of most “a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing.” There is no reliable number for the civilian deaths from violence and cholera, but the 10,000 mark was passed two years ago, and eight million or more are now at risk of famine in the coming months. (Yemen watchers have noted that Khashoggi’s murder has mobilized incomparably more public opposition to the Saudis than all the news from Yemen combined.) President Trump has shown little interest in overseas humanitarian operations, but if a famine on this scale occurs, it is hard to imagine—and repellent to believe—that the United States would do nothing.

The chaos in Yemen threatens to amplify the terrorist threat, just as conflicts have done elsewhere in the region. Jihadists thrive in war zones, where recruitment soars and experience with weaponry and explosives is easy to obtain. Although most such fighters will never leave Yemen, their burgeoning numbers increase the chances that some will — possibly with new techniques and capabilities. Allowing the war to rage on, many experts warn, has given al Qaeda and ISIS an opportunity to rebuild.

Past American administrations often bemoaned the chronic hesitancy of Saudi rulers. But swinging so far to the other extreme looks to be worse. MbS’s record in office is a dismal one, all the fanfare about economic reform notwithstanding. The question thus becomes: What will it take to restrain the kingdom’s unbound crown prince? Rumors circulated before the killing of Khashoggi that King Salman was concerned enough to consider putting some fetters on his heir. Whether he does or not, the United States needs to establish some distance from the headstrong prince—and curtailing his supply of weaponry may be a good place to start. Enabling him is not helping us.

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# Don't Let the Saudis Destabilize Lebanon

Why Washington Should Restrain Riyadh

By [Bilal Y. Saab](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/bilal-y-saab), Foreign Affairs

Across the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is attempting to push back against Iran. Now, after its defeat in Syria, struggles in Yemen, and [mixed record in Iraq](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-21/how-saudi-arabia-stepping-iraq), Riyadh is set to make Lebanon the next front in its [conflict with Tehran](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-05-30/keeping-iran-and-saudi-arabia-war).

Saudi Arabia’s target in Lebanon is [Hezbollah](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2017-09-29/how-washington-can-counter-rise-hezbollah), the powerful Shiite party with an old and deep alliance with Iran. Thanks to Tehran’s generous and consistent financial and military assistance, Hezbollah has transformed into a formidable regional power—one that in recent years has cemented its dominance over Lebanon’s national security decisionmaking, bolstered its deterrence against Israel, helped save the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, and supported fellow Shiite militias in Bahrain, Iraq, and Yemen.

The Saudis see Hezbollah’s control of politics in Beirut as untenable. That is why, in a clear departure from past policy, they have decided to confront Hezbollah more actively by holding the Lebanese government responsible for the group’s regional adventurism—including in the Saudis’ own backyard in Yemen, where Hezbollah allegedly supports the Houthi rebels.

Bottom of Form

The first sign of punitive Saudi measures against Lebanon was the forced [resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2017-11-06/what-hariris-resignation-means-lebanon)on November 4, while Hariri was in Riyadh. The Saudis didn’t believe that Hariri, who had sought consensus with Hezbollah last year to ensure his own political survival, was willing or able to execute their new hardline policy on Hezbollah. So they compelled him to quit. But Saudi retribution might not stop here. Riyadh could also ramp up pressure on Hezbollah by pulling all Saudi deposits from Lebanese banks and expelling Lebanese nationals from Saudi territory, both of which would be detrimental to the country’s financial stability. Riyadh may assume that an internal crisis in Lebanon will distract Hezbollah, preventing it from expanding and deepening its involvement in other battlefields across the region. A major disruption of the status quo in Lebanon will expand the arc of crisis and chaos across the region.

The Saudis have every reason to be concerned about Hezbollah’s activities in Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere. There is no question that the group’s lack of accountability to the Lebanese state, total disregard for Lebanese sovereignty, and cache of weapons (which it has used against both domestic and foreign foes) will continue to impede Lebanon’s state-building project and threaten the security of several of the United States’ regional partners, including Israel. But causing political ruin and economic collapse in Lebanon as a way to weaken Hezbollah, as the Saudis seem intent on doing, is in nobody’s interest.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s [full embrace of the new Saudi leadership](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-05-18/trump-goes-saudi-arabia), represented by King Salman and his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has enabled the kingdom to stake out a bold position vis-a-vis Iran and pursue its risky gamble in Lebanon. But it seems that other senior members of the administration have privately but [sternly urged](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/saudi-arabias-prince-is-doing-damage-control/2017/11/16/e3710ba4-cb14-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html?utm_term=.69270207280f) their Saudi counterparts in Washington to back off on Lebanon and refrain from using the country as a venue for their proxy confrontation with Iran. If such reports are accurate, these officials were absolutely right in doing so. But it is unclear whether Riyadh will listen.

There are three reasons why the United States should put a firm brake on Riyadh’s plans in Lebanon: First, the Saudis are likely to alienate their own Lebanese allies and strengthen Hezbollah; second, the costs to the United States of destabilizing Lebanon are much greater than the benefits to be gained from an ill-conceived fight with Hezbollah; and third, there are better ways to undermine Hezbollah without hurting Lebanon as a whole.

Saudi Arabia’s new Lebanon policy has already generated a ton of resentment among the country’s Sunnis—the one community that is supposed to be most supportive of Riyadh. By strong-arming and humiliating their leader so publicly, Saudi Arabia has alienated many Lebanese Sunnis. Their love of country is stronger than their hatred of Hezbollah. Moreover, they, like all Lebanese, are deeply concerned about their living conditions and economic fortunes, and fear what would happen should Saudi Arabia start applying financial sanctions indiscriminately.

Political volatility and financial hardship, moreover, might distract Hezbollah but won’t necessarily weaken it. The group is perfectly capable of finding a replacement for Hariri, and even if relations deteriorate between Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon, Hezbollah has the guns to silence its critics—more guns, in fact, than the country’s armed forces. One must remember that Hezbollah was born in the midst of the most violent phase of the country’s civil war in the early 1980s. It thrives in chaos and over time has mastered the art of survival. Hezbollah is not untouchable, but it is dominant partly because its local adversaries are weak and divided.

A major disruption of the status quo in Lebanon will expand the arc of crisis and chaos across the region, likely benefiting [the United States’ enemies](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2017-10-06/russia-and-next-lebanon-war), including Iran, the Islamic State (ISIS), and al-Qaeda. The United States has spent a ton of treasure and political capital to kick ISIS out of Iraq and Syria. The last thing it wants is a broken state in Lebanon that would give ISIS an opportunity to regroup while providing fertile ground for other extremist movements.

Despite its profound dysfunction, moreover, Lebanon does offer a model of sectarian coexistence that could be enormously useful for countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, which have been wracked by civil war. Lebanon’s unique political experiment and religious openness are the most potent weapons against further radicalization in the Middle East. All of this is no doubt worth preserving.

Finally, there are better ways to accomplish Riyadh’s goal of weakening Hezbollah. The Saudis would be better off working with the United States to enact tougher and more pointed financial sanctions against Hezbollah instead of trying to tank the Lebanese economy, which is already struggling to deal with some 1.5 million Syrian refugees in a country of barely six million. The Saudis could also financially support their allies in Lebanon’s parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for March 2018, to help reduce Hezbollah’s political influence.

Lebanon is both too fragmented and too precious to be used as a proxy in Riyadh’s strategic competition with Tehran. This strategy has been tried before by Israel, with help from the United States, on multiple occasions (most recently in 2006), and every single time it has led to disaster and further weakening of the country. Saudi—and U.S.—interests would be better served by learning from that history.

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# Is Major Realignment Taking Place in the Middle East?

Why Turkey Is Pivoting Toward Iran and Russia

By [Colin P. Clarke](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/colin-p-clarke) and [Ariane M. Tabatabai](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/authors/ariane-m-tabatabai), Foreign Affairs

Having long criticized U.S. policy in the Middle East, President Donald Trump has outlined the contours of a fresh approach to the region. Last month, his administration unveiled its [new Syria strategy](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/10/bolton-pledges-american-troops-syria-iran/573121/), marking a departure from a mission focused on countering the Islamic State (or ISIS) to one aimed at containing Iran. But these new plans don’t consider a critical challenge: the shifting alignments in the region, which have intensified following the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal [Khashoggi](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-10-26/whats-stake-erdogan-khashoggi-affair) at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Alignments in the Middle East have long been shifting tectonic plates. For decades, regional powers—particularly Iran, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—have competed to maximize power against the backdrop of interventions by Russia, the United Kingdom, and, later, the United States. Until recently, the United States and its regional allies—Israel, the majority of the Arab Gulf states, and Turkey—were aligned against Iran. In the aftermath of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, it seemed certain that these regional powers, backed by Washington, would succeed in isolating the mullahs. But myriad domestic, regional, and international factors have combined to obviate this long-standing status quo. The most significant result of these developments has been Turkey’s drift away from the United States and toward Iran and Russia.

ANKARA’S STRATEGIC PIVOT

Bottom of Form

There are several reasons for Ankara’s emerging alignment with Tehran and Moscow. First, the ascension of Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the Turkish presidency in 2014—a move that marked his consolidation of power after over a decade as prime minister—signaled a shift in the country’s politics. Erdogan has empowered religious factions and moved the country away from Ankara’s celebrated secularism, which dates back to its founder, Kemal Ataturk, in the early twentieth century. Erdogan’s worldview shares many tenets with those of the Islamic Republic and Russia. Like Moscow and Tehran, Ankara is now more anti-Western than at any point in recent memory. In that sense, Turkey is pivoting away from NATO and toward the two revisionist powers.

Erdogan’s beliefs shape his perception of the regional order. The Turkish president appears to see himself as a modern-day sultan, the rightful heir to Sunni leadership. He has gone so far [as to claim](https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-journalists-disappearance-reshapes-mideast-relationships-1539878379) that his “is the only country that can lead the Muslim world.” This makes the House of Saud less of an ally and more of a competitor.

The Khashoggi murder is only the latest in a series of developments that have exacerbated tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, the Khashoggi murder is only the latest in a series of developments that have exacerbated tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In the ongoing rift in the Persian Gulf, in which Saudi Arabia and its allies severed ties with Qatar (ostensibly because of Qatar’s assertive and independent foreign policy, but in reality because of growing tensions stemming from the Saudi approach to Iran and the war in Yemen), Ankara joined Tehran in supporting Doha. For Turkey, the Gulf state was an important ally whose regional outlook aligned with its own. And the two countries’ economic ties were also important to Ankara. Even before the crisis, Turkey had [signed](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40262713) a military protocol with Qatar and opened its first military base in the region in 2015. More recently, Turkey [signed a deal](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/turkey-russia-sign-deal-on-supply-of-s-400-missiles-idUSKBN1EN0T5) to purchase Russian-made S-400 missile systems, prompting U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis [to warn](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-russia/turkish-purchase-of-russian-anti-missile-system-concerns-u-s-mattis-idUSKCN1LD1XS) Turkey that it should reconsider the move, as NATO wouldn’t be able to integrate these weapons into its order of battle.

These developments have occurred against the backdrop of the Syrian conflict, where the United States and Saudi Arabia have remained united by a long-standing partnership, their respective enmity toward Iran, and the ongoing war in Yemen. For Turkey, the Iran-Russia nexus now seems to be a better fit than NATO. Ankara is preoccupied with stabilizing Syria, even if this means that President Bashar al-Assad remains in power. This objective aligns with Iranian and Russian goals. Moscow and Tehran have worked closely together in Syria—with Russia providing air cover to Iran’s ground troops—to secure both Assad’s grip on power and their own regional status. Both they and Turkey have an interest in preserving Syria’s territorial integrity, which could help them avoid a possible regional fragmentation and state failure that could spill over and threaten their own survival.

Turkey also appears to be more concerned about the Kurds than about ISIS, another factor that aligns it more with Iran and Russia than with the United States and Saudi Arabia. Iran is perhaps better positioned than the United States and NATO to help assuage Turkish concerns regarding the future of the Kurds. Although apparently no party wishes to see the Kurds split from their respective states, Iran—like Turkey—seems to feel acutely threatened by an empowered Kurdish population. For both Iran and Turkey, the dismemberment of Syria and a Kurdish split from the country could lead to a slippery slope emboldening their Kurdish populations and creating a threat to their territorial integrity and national unity.

A residual ISIS presence, meanwhile, provides the Ankara-Tehran-Moscow-Damascus quartet with an excuse to keep their militaries active in the theater. That doesn’t mean these capitals don’t legitimately perceive ISIS as a threat. Instead, they see opportunity in a weakened ISIS whose territorial control and capabilities are largely diminished, allowing them to justify their persistent and at times aggressive military efforts.In fact, Erdogan is even [developing](https://www.thedailybeast.com/turkeys-erdogan-has-grand-plans-for-al-qaedas-syrian-spin-off?ref=author) closer ties with Tahrir al-Sham, an al Qaeda–linked terrorist group mainly active in Syria and numbering about 10,000 fighters. The group, Erdogan seems to believe, can be directed against the People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia force that Turks reportedly [see](https://www.dailysabah.com/americas/2018/10/17/us-receives-100m-for-ypg-in-syria-from-saudi-government-as-pompeo-lands-in-riyadh-report) as empowered by U.S. and Saudi efforts in Syria.

To be sure, Iran, Russia, and Turkey all still harbor a certain distrust of one another. And their distrust is rooted in a history of rivalry. After all, the three countries have fought one another in devastating wars and competed for power in the region. At the same time, they currently have a number of shared interests and common threat perceptions, leading them to work closely together in several areas, including in the military and economic realms.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WASHINGTON

In the morass of Middle East geopolitics, Turkey appears to be the big winner, capitalizing on this realignment to improve its image in the Muslim world as a leading nation willing to stand up to Saudi Arabia—whose closer relationship with Israel and leading role in the disastrous war in Yemen have tarnished its reputation. Ankara seems to be playing both sides of the Syrian conflict, perhaps in an attempt to maximize its leverage in future negotiations. Indeed, the success of U.S. Syria policy depends in part on Turkey. As a result, Washington should understand Ankara’s main regional objectives and assess NATO’s ability to forestall an undesired shift in the regional balance of power.

Turkey’s ostensible realignment will likely affect the new U.S. campaign in Syria and the viability of Washington’s Middle East policy as a whole. In response to this development, the United States should consider using its seat at the table to show that it has both the means and the political will to contribute to a stable Syria. It should signal that it can be an honest broker—although this would probably be a tough pill to swallow, given that almost any viable peace agreement will leave Assad in place. Assad has committed countless atrocities, including using chemical weapons against his own people, but the prospects of the United States removing him from power are increasingly dim. Rather than remaining focused on Assad’s removal, the Trump administration should look at the bigger picture and secure U.S. interests in the region. Critically, Syria can’t remain [a safe haven](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/3kmw79/isis-germany-hair-transplants-syria-turkey) for international terrorist groups to plan attacks around the globe—as they have done recently with disrupted plots targeting Germany and the Netherlands.

As reports of the events surrounding Khashoggi’s death grew increasingly horrifying, Saudi Arabia [provided $100 million](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-money-syria.html) to the United States to help stabilize Syria. But it appears Riyadh won’t be able to buy its way out of this situation. That money may be enough to prolong the transactional U.S.-Saudi relationship a while longer. But it will do little to halt the momentum of a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape, in which Iran, Russia, and Turkey are emerging as a coherent bloc. These three countries’ alignment—rooted in shared interests in Syria—could transcend that specific theater and lead to a more fundamental realignment of power throughout the region, with long-term implications for the United States.

# *Trump Pressures Saudi Arabia to Increase Oil Production*

President Trump tweeted on Saturday that Saudi Arabia’s King Salman has agreed to increase oil production. In a statement, Saudi Arabia said he had spoken to Mr. Trump, but the nation did not cite any specific production figures.CreditAl Drago for The New York Times



Image

President Trump tweeted on Saturday that Saudi Arabia’s King Salman has agreed to increase oil production. In a statement, Saudi Arabia said he had spoken to Mr. Trump, but the nation did not cite any specific production figures.CreditCreditAl Drago for The New York Times

**By**[**Stanley Reed**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/stanley-reed)**and**[**Mihir Zaveri**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/mihir-zaveri)

* June 30, 2018

President Trump [tweeted on Saturday](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1013023608040513537) that he had once again leaned on Saudi Arabia, the world’s largest oil exporter, to increase production by as much as 2 million barrels a day.

In recent months, Mr. Trump has put pressure on the Saudis and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to increase supplies through tweets and other messages. His tweet on Saturday came as many Americans were hitting the roads to begin an extended Fourth of July holiday.

In recent weeks, the Trump administration has been signaling that it wants to take much of Iran’s oil exports off the market. Worries about the loss of that oil have been pushing up oil prices. Analysts say that Saudi help in making up for lost Iranian crude oil will be crucial to Mr. Trump’s efforts to contain Iran while not forcing prices up too high to cause political damage in the United States. “This strategy hinges on Saudi Arabia,” Helima Croft, an analyst at RBC Capital Markets, said in an interview on Friday.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, was selling on Friday for over $79 a barrel, and there is talk that in certain circumstances a return to $100 a barrel oil is possible. “It’s certainly easy to imagine a scenario at this point where oil prices hit $100 again this year,” said Jason Bordoff, director of the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University.

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Pressure from Mr. Trump did help prod Saudi Arabia, Russia and other producers to[agree to gradually increase supply](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/business/opec-oil-production-prices.html?module=inline) by as much as 1 million barrels a day at meetings on June 22 and June 23 in Vienna. “We will do whatever is necessary to keep the market in balance,” the Saudi energy minister, Khalid Al-Falih, [told journalists](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/business/opec-oil-production.html?module=inline) at OPEC headquarters in Vienna at the end of the meeting, with Russia’s energy minister Alexander Novak seated at his side.

Since then, though, the Trump administration has upped the ante by signaling a tough line on closing down Iranian production. Since the lifting of sanctions in 2016, Iran has returned as a major oil supplier, selling around 2.5 million barrels a day, or more than 2 percent of global supplies. Traders worry that a major curtailment of Tehran’s output could risk creating a supply crunch that might drive prices skyward.

“If we take 2 million barrels of oil off the market, what is going to be left in the tank?” Ms. Croft asked.

Mr. Trump said in his tweet that he had asked Saudi Arabia to increase production to compensate for what he called “turmoil & disfunction in Iran and Venezuela.” But most analysts think that coming up with that much oil quickly would be a challenge for the Saudis.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, says it has 2 million barrels a day in spare capacity, but analysts are skeptical that it can easily and sustainably add more than 700,000 barrels of production a day without drilling and other work that would take time. “Once you get above that level, we are into uncharted territory,” said David Fyfe, chief economist at the Gunvor Group, a major trading house. “Can they really push above that quickly?”

Aside from the Saudis, only a handful of producers, including Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, are likely to be able to put more oil on the market soon. The International Energy Agency, the Paris-based group that represents consumer countries, recently estimated what it called “short order supply” from the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, at 1.14 million barrels a day. Russia could also add as much as 400,000 barrels a day, analysts say.

While production in the United States has been rising rapidly, largely through the extraction of oil from shale rock, analysts forecast that the growth is likely to slow in the coming months because of a lack of sufficient pipelines to transport the oil to markets.

At the same time, factional fighting in Libya is causing a large outage, while the oil output of Venezuela, once a major producer, has fallen by around 1 million barrels a day over the last two years, with further steep declines possible in the coming months.

The market is not short of oil now. But traders are concerned that all of these problems may add up to shortages down the road. Estimates of how much spare capacity or quickly accessible oil is available vary, but most experts think it would be challenging to cover a large drop in Iranian exports combined with other outages.

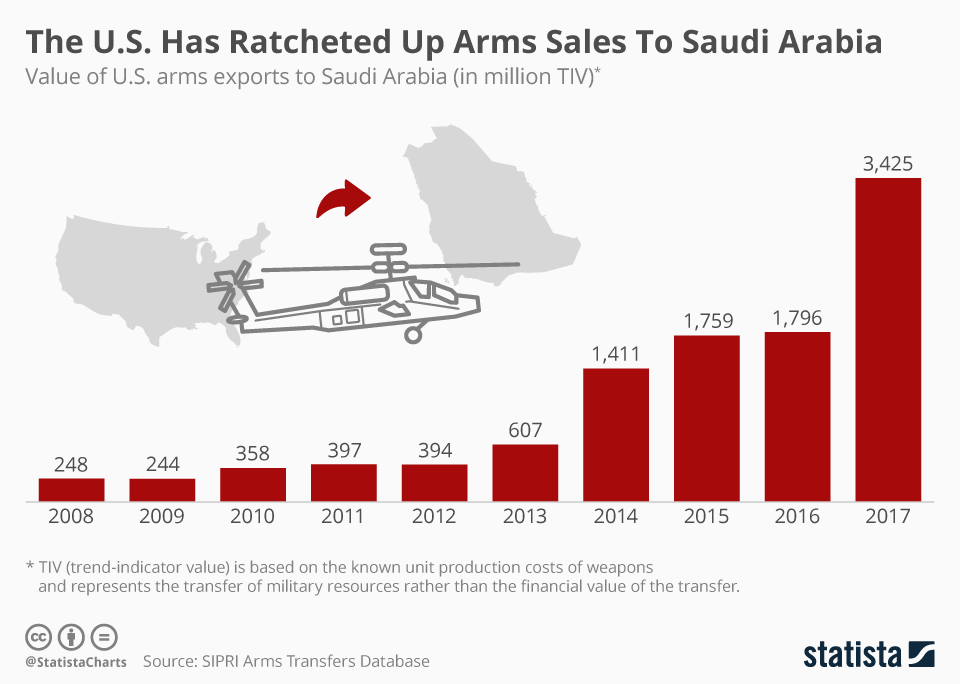
In a statement on Saturday, Saudi Arabia said that King Salman had spoken to Mr. Trump and that the leaders discussed the need to address any potential shortages in the supply of oil as well as maintain stability in the oil markets. The statement did not include any specific figures.

The Saudis are longstanding regional rivals of Iran, and they generally welcome the tough line Mr. Trump is taking toward Tehran.

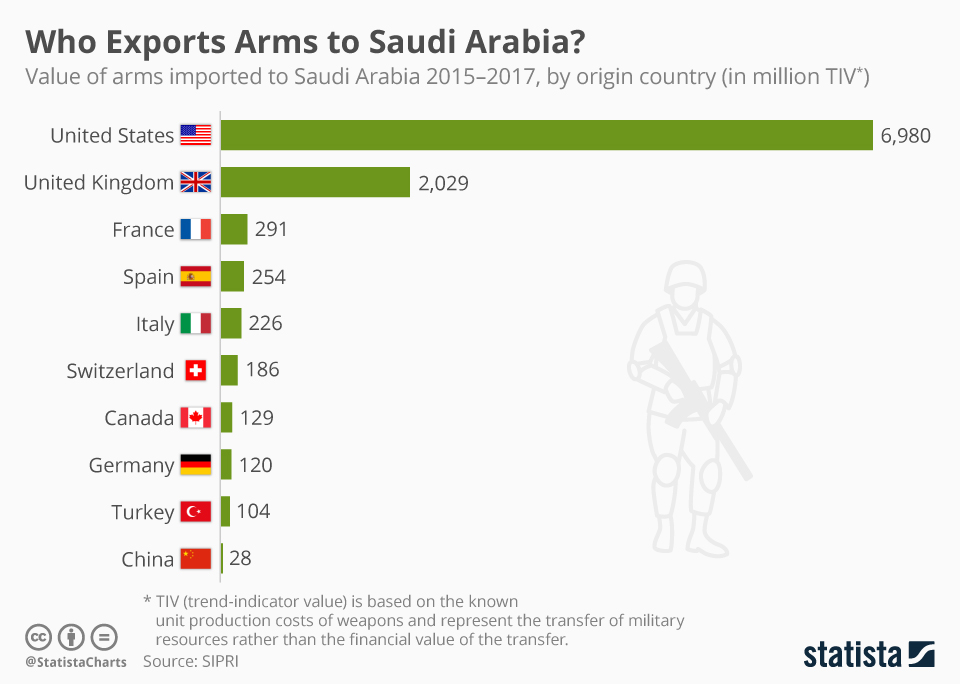
In its own statement on Saturday, the White House said Mr. Trump and King Salman agreed that balancing the global oil market was “essential to ensure access to reliable and affordable energy to people everywhere.”

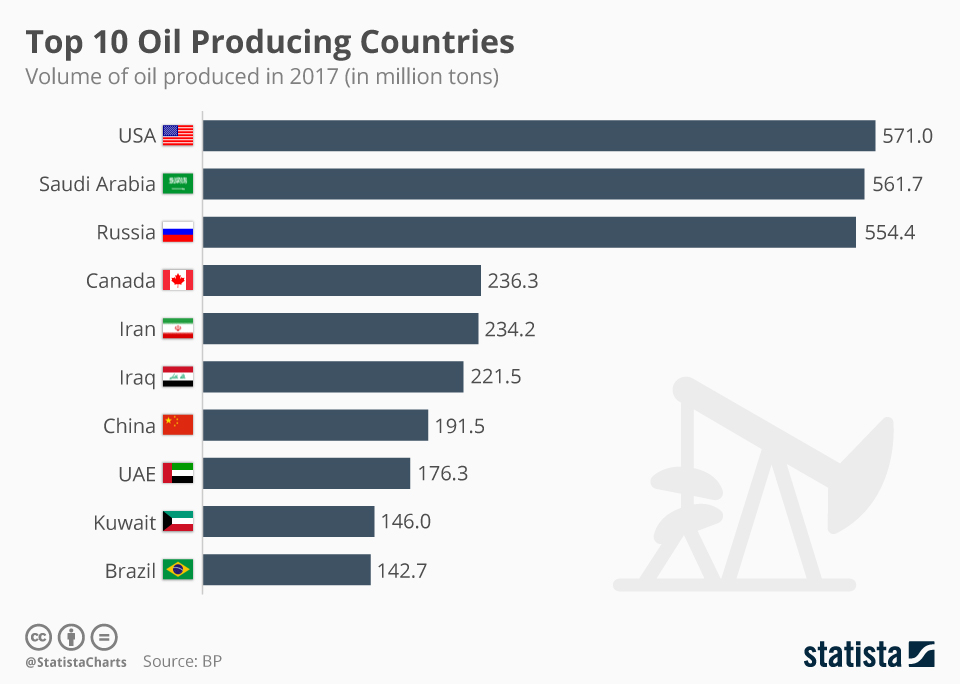
The White House said King Salman affirmed that the kingdom maintained a two million barrel per day spare capacity, which it would “prudently use if and when necessary.”

# Charts from Statistica









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# UU.S. Department of State

Fact Sheet

BUREAU OF POLITICAL-MILITARY AFFAIRS

October 16, 2018

Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in maintaining security in the Middle East, due to its economic, political, and cultural importance and its strategic location. Given the complex and dynamic security challenges facing the region, which include countering violent extremism from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as well as other extremist groups, the United States works with Saudi Arabia to support counterterrorism efforts and our shared interest in regional stability. In addition, building on the May 2017 Riyadh Summit, we are working to increase cooperation on maritime security, military preparedness, arms transfers, and cybersecurity.

As a result of U.S. security cooperation, the Kingdom has foiled numerous terrorist attempts against Saudi and foreign targets, and has been able to successfully deter external attacks. The United States remains committed to providing the Saudi armed forces with the equipment, training, and follow-on support necessary to protect Saudi Arabia, and the region, from the destabilizing effects of terrorism, countering Iranian influence, and other threats. Toward that end, the United States will continue to collaborate with Saudi Arabia to improve training for special operations and counterterrorism forces, integrate air and missile defense systems, strengthen cyber defenses, and bolster maritime security.

Saudi Arabia is the United States’ largest foreign military sales (FMS) customer, with over $114 billion in active cases. With the signing of the May 2017 $110 billion agreement to pursue Saudi Armed Forces modernization by President Trump and King Salman, we expect a significant increase in FMS and DCS cases. To date this initiative resulted in over $14.5 billion in implemented FMS cases. In January 2017, the United States approved a possible FMS case to Saudi Arabia for a Persistent Threat Detection System (PTDS), also known as a 74K Aerostat System, for an estimated cost of $525 million. In May 2017, the United States approved an FMS sale to Saudi Arabia for continuation of a naval blanket order training program for an estimated cost of $250 million. In June 2017, the United States approved the continuation of a blanket order training program that includes flight training, technical training, professional military education, specialized training, mobile training teams, and English language training, valued at $750 million. In June 2017, the United States approved a possible sale of 26 AN/TPQ-53(V) Radar Systems and related training and equipment for an estimated cost of $930 million. As part of a Saudi Arabia eastern fleet modernization, in October 2017, the United States implemented a $6 billion FMS case for a 4 ship Multi-Mission Surface Combatant program. In October 2017, the United States approved the potential sale of 44 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) launchers, 360 THAAD Interceptor Missiles, 16 THAAD Fire Control and Communications Mobile Tactical Station Group, seven AN/TPY-2 THAAD radars, and associated support equipment, for an estimated cost of $13.5 billion.

The Saudi-led coalition is supporting the legitimate Yemeni government and defending its territory from an incursion by Houthi rebels. The United States continues to work with the Saudi-led Coalition in an effort to reduce and minimize civilian casualties in this conflict. The Saudi government is taking measures to improve its targeting processes and has also adopted mechanisms for investigating alleged incidents of civilian casualties and addressing them operationally, as appropriate.

The Saudis have agreed to receive training from U.S. forces on Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and best practices for preventing civilian casualties. Planned training events for the Royal Saudi Air Force and other Saudi security forces will specifically include further training on the LOAC and air-to-ground targeting processes.

Future bilateral and multi-lateral training is designed to improve the Saudi security forces’ understanding of identifying, targeting and engaging correct targets while minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties.

For further information, please contact the [Bureau of Political-Military Affairs](http://www.state.gov/t/pm/#_blank), Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at [PM-CPA@state.gov](mailto:PM-CPA@state.gov), and follow the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs on Twitter, [*@StateDeptPM*](https://twitter.com/StateDeptPM#_blank).

# [UNDER TRUMP, U.S. STILL LEADS WORLD’S ARMS EXPORTERS — AND YEMENIS ARE STILL PAYING THE PRICE](https://theintercept.com/2018/03/14/us-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-yemen/)

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[José Olivares](https://theintercept.com/staff/joseolivares/), The Intercept March 14 2018, 2:32 p.m.

UNDER THE TRUMP administration, the U.S. government and weapons manufacturers are making a killing through arms sales to other countries. A report released by the Security Assistance Monitor documented that more than $80 billion worth of arm sales notifications were sent to Congress in 2017.

The massive arms sales during President Donald Trump’s first year in office amounted to $5.7 billion more than the Obama administration proposed during its final year in 2016. Barack Obama’s banner year for sales, 2010, saw $102 billion worth of government-to-government sales proposed.

The U.S. was responsible for 34 percent of the entire world’s arms exports from 2013 to 2017.

Owing to the spate of large sales under both administrations, the U.S. has maintained its role as the biggest arms exporter in the world. In a report released on Monday by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, or SIPRI, an international institute researching conflict and armaments, the U.S. was responsible for 34 percent of the entire world’s arms exports from 2013 to 2017. Russia follows with 22 percent of the world’s exports.

All the while, U.S. arms manufacturing corporations have been raking in tremendous amounts of cash. Stocks for Lockheed Martin – ranked first for arm sales in 2016 by SIPRI – have been steadily on the rise since 2013. Stocks for the Boeing Company, which ranks second, have also been on the rise since 2013, but rose at an accelerated pace in 2017.

The report from the Security Assistance Monitor, a program of the Center for International Policy that tracks and analyzes U.S. security assistance programs worldwide, notes another difference between the Obama and Trump administration sale proposals: the types of equipment offered to foreign governments. The most significant sale offers under the Obama administration were for military aircraft, while in the first year of the Trump administration, missile and bomb sales dominated. 

THE TOP RECIPIENT of U.S. weapons in the deals proposed by the Trump administration was Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has U.S. support, has already killed thousands of civilians and led to massive starvation. The Trump administration proposed almost $17.9 billion worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2017.

“Signing off on missile and bomb sales to Saudi Arabia when the country was using these weapons to attack the civilian population in Yemen sent an alarming signal about the U.S. support for human rights,” said Colby Goodman, director of the Security Assistance Monitor and editor of the group’s report.

Saudi-U.S. ties have grown warmer under the Trump administration, largely owing to a perceived carte blanche from the U.S. for Saudi Arabia’s Yemen war, support for a Saudi blockade of its erstwhile ally [Qatar](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/06/qatar-panic-buying-as-shoppers-stockpile-food-due-to-saudi-blockade), and virtual silence from the U.S. in the face of a Saudi purge that reportedly [involved abuse](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-corruption-mohammed-bin-salman.html). Underlying this support is Saudi Arabia’s intense regional rivalry with the U.S.’s longtime foe, Iran. In a March 2017 meeting, Saudi leadership and Trump publicly declared Iran to be a key regional security threat. (While his relationship with Saudi Arabia was rocky amid nuclear diplomacy with Iran, Obama also sold the Persian Gulf kingdom billions in weapons — his banner year for sales in 2010 included a $60 billion [deal](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-arms/u-s-announces-60-billion-arms-sale-for-saudi-arabia-idUSTRE69J4ML20101020)with Saudi Arabia for aircrafts and other arms.)

“The USA and European states remain the main arms exporters to the region and supplied over 98 percent of weapons imported by Saudi Arabia.”

Although a group of senators are attempting to [end U.S. support](https://theintercept.com/2018/02/28/yemen-war-bernie-sanders-saudi-arabia/) for the war in Yemen, Congress has largely failed to stop the flow of U.S. arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., had recently placed a hold on arms sales to all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which included the Saudi-aligned Yemen war coalition members. Corker’s reasoning did not have to do with alleged human rights abuses by the Saudi regime. His goal was to encourage discussion to end internal disputes between countries. When resolving internal conflicts was deemed unsuccessful, Corker lifted his hold, opening the door to the continuation of arms sales. (Corker’s office did not respond to a request for comment.)

The legality of U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia was recently questioned by a report from the American Bar Association’s Center for Human Rights, saying the sales violate stipulations under the Arms Export Control Act. Yet, arms transfers continue. So far in 2018, the State Department has approved more than $770 million worth of arms sales and assistance to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – both of which are central players in the war in Yemen.

“Widespread violent conflict in the Middle East and concerns about human rights have led to political debate in western Europe and North America about restricting arms sales,” said Peter Wezeman, a senior researcher with SIPRI. “Yet the USA and European states remain the main arms exporters to the region and supplied over 98 percent of weapons imported by Saudi Arabia.”

THE ARMS EXPORT Control Act requires the State Department to notify Congress of its approval for large sales. Congress then has a specific amount of time – which varies depending on the type of sale – to reject the State Department’s proposal for moving forward. If Congress does nothing, the sale goes through.

“The United States takes into account political, military, economic, arms control, and human rights conditions in making decisions on the provision of military equipment and the licensing of direct commercial sales to any country,” states a State Department fact sheet provided to The Intercept.

Congressional notification does not necessarily mean an arms sale deal is completed. But the Monitor’s report notes that notifications are a good way to gauge the administration’s intent.

Congress did reject two arms sales deals in 2017, according to the report. One was for the Philippine police, which has been engaged in an anti-drug campaign of merciless street killings. The other rejected deal was for the presidential guard in Turkey, where an apparent failed coup in 2016 opened the door for further consolidation of power by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The United States partakes in two types of arms sales. The first is a foreign military sale, in which a country buys weapons from the U.S. government – basically a government-to-government sale. The second type of sale is a direct commercial sale, which are private-corporation-to-government sales. Even though the equipment comes from private corporations, sales still need to go through a government approval process.

“The decision to arm repressive regimes and support nations’ acts of war has serious negative consequences for U.S. security.”

According to the State Department fact sheet, the arms sale process can take quite a long time depending on the type of sale. The long process makes it probable that some of the 2017 requests may have been made prior to Trump taking office.

There have been rumors that the Trump administration is attempting to [expedite and elevate arms sales](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-weapons/exclusive-trump-to-call-on-pentagon-diplomats-to-play-bigger-arms-sales-role-sources-idUSKBN1EX0WX). Trump has stressed that the defense equipment industry is a great opportunity to provide more jobs.

“It’s a bad deal,” said William Hartung, author of the Security Assistance Monitor report. “The jobs claims are overrated, and the decision to arm repressive regimes and support nations’ acts of war has serious negative consequences for U.S. security.”

This year is already off to a great start for weapons manufacturers. According to data analyzed by The Intercept, the State Department has already approved more than $13.4 billion worth of government-to-government arms sales in 2018.

Top photo: Saudi soldiers stand by in an airfield as a Saudi Air Force cargo plane lands at an airfield in Yemen’s northeastern province of Marib on Jan. 26, 2018.

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