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Has the Saudi-American Alliance Outlived Its Usefulness?

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You would not have a hard time making the case for the American alliance with, let's say, Germany. It's a major trading partner, has a similar system of government and there's lots of migration and cultural exchange between the two countries. Most important of all, their foreign policy priorities generally align. Working together is pretty much all upside.

Same goes for alliances with other wealthy democracies like Japan, Australia or France.

Partnerships with countries like Israel, Thailand or Ukraine can be more complicated. The shared interests are a bit narrower. Their political systems and foreign policies generate a bit more friction with those of the United States. Still, they're arguable.

But the case for the Saudi-American relationship — not a formal alliance, but treated as such — can be harder to explain.

Now, as the Khashoggi affair brings new scrutiny to the kingdom's practices and values, more Americans are openly questioning the alliance's value.

"It's no longer clear that American interests are well-served by a close relationship with the Saudis," Emma Ashford, a foreign affairs analyst, writes in War on the Rocks, a national security policy site.

Of course, the alliance didn't come from nowhere. There are meaningful shared interests. But they're often not quite as shared — or as valuable — as perhaps they once were. So it's worth reviewing the most-mentioned purposes of the alliance and their merit.

1. Oil

If you stopped an American on the street and asked him or her to sum up the Saudi-American alliance in one word, it would probably be oil. They sell it, we buy it.

But this has not really been true, at least in the sense that people mean it, for decades.

During the Cold War, two oil exporters dominated global markets: Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union. And the United States relied heavily on imports. The Saudis cutting off sales, as they did in the 1970s over Israel, could cripple the United States.

So the United States desperately needed to keep the Saudis on their side, both for its own needs and to balance against Soviet energy dominance. Once the partnership was established, they worked to keep the reliable Saudi royal family in power.

None of this is quite true anymore. The Saudis make up a smaller share of the market, as other oil producers have come online. The United States now produces lots of its own oil. Its greatest source of imports is, by far, Canada.

Oil is traded on global markets — rather than country to country — that today have built-in shock absorbers, like strategic reserves. A Saudi cut-off wouldn't be the catastrophe it once was, and there is no longer a threat of Saudi-Soviet (or Saudi-Russian) alignment.

2. Mutual enemies

The second most common argument for the alliance is that the United States needs the Saudis to combat shared enemies.

There are two problems with this. First, the list of shared enemies has shrunk from three (the Soviet Union, Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq) to just one: Iran.

Second, this formulation gets things mostly backward. It is the Saudis who need the United States to combat their enemies, not the other way around.

The Saudis, for reasons that are complicated and debatable but at least feel real to them, consider Iran to be an imminent existential threat.

This is not the case for the United States. Rather, there are a number of smaller reasons that the United States considers Iran to be an enemy. The main one, according to Americans who advocate for a policy of hostility toward Iran, is the country's growing regional influence. Therefore, they argue, we must ally with Saudi Arabia to push Iran back.

But the logic for this can be a bit circular. We need to ally with Saudi Arabia to stand up to Iran, because Iran is a threat to our Saudi allies?

If the goal is to protect America's other Middle Eastern ally, Israel, then there are other ways to do that. The Obama administration argued for a kind of détente in which Saudi Arabia and Iran would share regional influence. This would, in theory, cool the Iranian-Saudi proxy wars that are arguably the biggest threat to the region, including to Israel. So it's not clear that a categorically pro-Saudi position is necessary or even desirable to achieve American regional aims.

Iran hawks will argue that this is naïve because Iran is an irrational cult state that will always seek regional domination. Maybe, but this is not quite borne out by recent history, in which Iran's regional efforts wax and wane in response to the country's perceived insecurity — the same way that any middle power behaves. Further, this line of reasoning implies that the only viable solution is forcible regime change, which the American experience in Iraq suggests can backfire.

3. Counterterrorism

This one is more complicated. The same jihadist terrorist groups that target Americans tend to hate the Saudi government even more. So the two countries have strong incentive to work together against jihadist terrorism, and often do so, sharing intelligence and so on.

Still, the Saudis are notorious for playing a double-game with extremism. The government often funds extremists abroad, for instance in Syria, to achieve some short-term goal. It also exports hard-line Islamism, partly in an attempt to co-opt Saudi Islamists who might otherwise make trouble at home.

In any case, it's not clear that fighting terrorism requires a full-fledged alliance with the Saudi state. The United States cooperates on intelligence sharing and counterterrorism with lots of less-than-friendly states, including Russia.

4. Stability

If the United States does not fully back the Saudi royal family, the argument goes, the kingdom will be at greater risk of unrest or collapse. At the same time, the Saudis are deeply invested in promoting the stability of the greater Middle East, so we should help them in that.

But these efforts to promote short-term stability might undermine it in the long term.

Within Saudi Arabia, the ostensible face of stability is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the young up-and-comer who is moving to aggressively consolidate power. But, in authoritarian states like Saudi Arabia, rapid power transfers often prove destabilizing. Prince Mohammed's efforts to dominate potential rivals and suppress critics, possibly including Jamal Khashoggi, do not appear to be making the kingdom more stable.

In the rest of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is not so much upholding stability as the status quo. Those are not necessarily the same things.

The years since the Arab Spring uprisings have shown that the old order was brittle and the old dictatorships too paranoid, corrupt and insecure to deal with change.

It's worth noting that the kingdom's two biggest pushes for "stability" have included backing a military coup in Egypt, which has only deepened social divisions and economic turmoil there, and its disastrous war in Yemen.

5. Arms sales

President Trump's increasingly extravagant claims about American sales to Saudi Arabia are simply not correct.

Though he has promised a \$110 billion arms deal that would create one million jobs, no such deal appears to exist. And the American defense industry is simply not that big. The White House has pointed, in Mr. Trump's defense, to a deal for Lockheed helicopters. The contract is valued at \$6 billion and is not expected to produce any new jobs because the helicopters will be produced in Saudi Arabia.

So the value of the defense contracting relationship with Saudi Arabia is just not anywhere near as great as Mr. Trump has suggested. And even if it were, Saudi Arabia is hardly the world's only prospective buyer of American military equipment.

If we're really so hard up for cash that we need that \$6 billion to flow into Lockheed's coffers at any cost to American interests and values, we could always identify a buyer that is not currently using American military equipment to inflict such profound suffering on Yemeni children that millions are considered to be on the brink of a famine.