

WAR ON THE ROCKS



The U.S.-Saudi Alliance was in Trouble Long Before Jamal Khashoggi's Death

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The murder of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has left Washington reeling — and Riyadh bewildered. Whether Saudi leaders didn't expect to get caught, or simply believed themselves above reproach, they appear to have been taken by surprise at the outpouring of criticism.

Indeed, Khashoggi's death feels like a watershed moment in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Suddenly, many in Washington are finally willing to admit that Saudi Arabia — a country they have long treated as a friend and partner — is little more than another murderous Middle East dictatorship. The White House may still be supportive, but newspapers are printing criticism, think tanks are returning Saudi money, and Congress is actively considering sanctions.

This moment has been a long time coming. Khashoggi's murder caps years of growing dissatisfaction about the Saudi alliance. Like a failing marriage, the United States and Saudi Arabia have long been drifting apart. Diverging U.S.-Saudi interests, and an increasingly reckless Saudi foreign policy have taken their toll on the relationship, even as domestic repression has grown inside Saudi Arabia. As Sen. Chris Murphy noted in a recent op-ed:

When I came to Congress a little more than 10 years ago, support for Saudi Arabia was broad and bipartisan. But now... more and more of us are wondering whether our ally's actions are in our own best interests.

Indeed, while some argue that the problem with the U.S.-Saudi relationship is a conflict between American interests and values, it's no longer clear that American interests are well-served by a close relationship with the Saudis. If policymakers follow through, the dissident's death could provide the opportunity to — finally — distance the United States from its toxic Saudi ally.

'The Most Significant Reform Process Underway Anywhere in the Middle East'

It hardly matters whether Khashoggi's death was accidental — part of a botched interrogation or planned abduction, or even a fight as the Saudi government now claims — or intentional. The brutal murder of the U.S. permanent resident in Turkey marks a new low in U.S.-Saudi relations.

Yet Khashoggi's murder is notable only for its brutality and his western connections. If indeed the Saudis originally intended to return him to Riyadh, he would be far from the first expatriate

kidnapped in this way since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — or MBS, as he is often known — began his ascent to power. One royal prince even found his plane to Cairo mysteriously diverted to Riyadh and members of his entourage subdued by armed flight attendants.

Since 2015, the crown prince has actively curtailed space for political criticism, tolerating no dissent, even from inside the royal family. His most obvious rival for power, former crown prince Mohammed bin Nayef, remains under house arrest. The young prince is even rumored to have placed his own mother under arrest to prevent her from independently advising his father, the king. Outside the family, MBS has cracked down on domestic opponents, from Shiite citizens in Saudi Arabia's Eastern provinces to human rights activists.

This may seem curiously at odds with the image of MBS found in the Western press: a young, far-sighted reformer, dragging his country kicking and screaming into the 21st century. The cultivation of this image — and the adulation which greeted MBS' arrival in Washington and London — is undoubtedly one of the recent successes of Saudi foreign policy. A highly successful Western tour included photo ops and meetings with luminaries from Bill Gates to Oprah Winfrey.

With pundits lauding his moves to loosen the kingdom's draconian restrictions on women, and his moonshot plan to wean his country off of oil through an IPO of Saudi oil company Aramco, it seemed the young prince could do no wrong. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson thanked the prince on Instagram for partying with him, while Tom Friedman got rather more florid with his praise in the *New York Times*.

What the pundits and politicians either missed or ignored, however, is that reform requires centralized political power. The reformist image of MBS presented in the press is not entirely untrue; women can now drive, and other economic and social reforms are taking place. Yet these reforms have not been matched by any political liberalization. Worse, in order to sustain these reforms, the Saudi royal court has increasingly resorted to repression.

In one case, the arrest of hundreds of prominent Saudi business leaders and their imprisonment in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton — ostensibly part of an anti-corruption drive — helped to cement the young prince's hold on power and replenish government coffers at a time of fiscal austerity. In another, a 2017 report from the United Nations makes clear that Saudi anti-terror laws are routinely used to justify torture and crack down on free speech.

Until recently, the focus on reform and the longstanding partnership between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia largely trumped any criticism of these crackdowns. Perhaps a few more articles bemoaning Saudi human rights abuses were published in Western papers. But domestic Saudi repression had little bearing on the U.S.-Saudi relationship until the death of Jamal Khashoggi. Now, of course, it's headline news.

Drifting Apart

Washington's willingness to criticize the Khashoggi murder owes as much to the changing nature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship as to growing repression. Though the few defenders of the Saudi government have trotted out the standard arguments in favor of the U.S.-Saudi partnership — oil, regional politics, arms sales — these arguments are far less persuasive today than they

were 35 years ago. The United States simply no longer needs a close relationship with Saudi Arabia to achieve its foreign policy goals and meet its energy needs.

Take oil. It's true that Saudi Arabia remains among the world's largest producers of oil, producing around a quarter of the world's crude oil. And thanks to changing production patterns — notably the growth of shale oil production in the United States — America is far less directly dependent on Middle Eastern energy.

Certainly, this doesn't mean Saudi oil supplies are unimportant to the United States. Since oil is priced globally, Saudi domestic stability is still key to ensuring a reasonable price for oil. Yet oil markets have come a long way since the Carter Doctrine. During President Jimmy Carter's time, the United States was reeling from twin oil shocks, as the 1973 OPEC embargo and the 1979 Iranian revolution triggered oil shortages and price hikes throughout the Western world. The Carter Doctrine — which promised to protect Middle Eastern oil-rich states, prevent Soviet regional hegemony, and protect global oil supplies — effectively committed the United States to act as Saudi Arabia's guarantor of security, a commitment fulfilled during the Gulf War.

Today, most of these risks have disappeared. Innovations like spot pricing and strategic reserves help to stabilize the market during shocks. There is no Soviet threat poised to dominate the region. To ensure the free flow of oil, the United States doesn't need a heavy military presence in the region. Instead, it needs to protect the global commons (i.e., sea lanes), and maintain the expeditionary capacity to re-enter the region if it becomes necessary, a posture often described as an over-the-horizon approach.

Energy security is a good reason to maintain a U.S. interest in Middle Eastern stability. It is no longer a sufficient reason to provide the Saudi government carte blanche.

Public understanding of these shifts in global energy production remains limited, as illustrated by recent concerns about Saudi Arabia's empty bluff to cut off oil supplies. But arguments about Saudi Arabia's importance for regional stability are no less dated, and far more visibly false; only 4 percent of Americans now consider Saudi Arabia to be a U.S. ally.

In Yemen, for example, Saudi-led forces have repeatedly ignored the laws of war, bombing schools and hospitals and refusing to allow necessary supplies to reach civilians trapped by conflict. Yemen is now experiencing a mass humanitarian crisis, including a famine that may soon be the worst in a hundred years. In Syria, the Saudis have mounted a concerted effort to fund and arm rebel groups in the fight against the Assad regime. With little vetting and less oversight, many of these weapons ended up in the hands of extremists.

These are only the most obvious examples. Saudi Arabia also actively opposed many of the uprisings of the Arab Spring, with Saudi tanks putting down a pro-democracy uprising in neighboring Bahrain. An ill-advised blockade — and apparent planned invasion of Qatar — remains unresolved, as does the kingdom's bizarre diplomatic spat with Canada. And Saudi money — both private and public — has long pushed an intolerant and hardline version of Islam that continues to inspire extremism throughout the region.

America's key interest in the Middle East is stability. Yet in recent years, Saudi foreign policy has far more often been destabilizing than stabilizing. Saudi Arabia is often portrayed as a bulwark against Iranian regional influence, but it's unclear why a destabilizing reactionary Saudi foreign policy is any better than a revolutionary Iranian one. Just as Iran sponsors

Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia has sponsored various militant groups in Syria. Iran meddles in Lebanese politics, while Saudi Arabia recently kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister. If America's regional interest is stability — rather than simply taking sides — it doesn't make sense to back either country in their regional aspirations.

Even arms sales — a more contemporary argument in favor of a close partnership with Saudi Arabia — are no longer convincing. With his typical exaggeration, President Donald Trump cited \$110 billion in arms sales and the resulting U.S. jobs as an excellent reason to maintain good relations with Riyadh. In fact, experts assess that Saudi arms sales are in reality worth only about \$20 billion, while the 4,000 jobs created are a tiny fraction of the overall U.S. defense industry. With Saudi human rights abuses now regularly making headlines, it is much harder to justify the sale of offensive weapons to the kingdom.

A Failing Marriage of Convenience

These gradual changes in the U.S.-Saudi relationship have been slowly felt in recent years. Even before Khashoggi's death, the Kingdom's bloody war in Yemen generated pushback from human rights groups. Meanwhile, Trump's close relationship with the government of Saudi Arabia has driven journalists to explore the free flow of Saudi money into institutions and lobbying firms here in Washington.

Perhaps the biggest change has been on Capitol Hill, where the Saudi alliance once enjoyed wholehearted support. A younger generation of policymakers like Murphy, Sen. Mike Lee and Rep. Ro Khanna now argue for fewer arms sales, an end to U.S. support for the war in Yemen, and a shift to a more arms-length relationship with Saudi Arabia. Nor is the opposition limited to new arrivals; Sen. Bernie Sanders has been an open and repeated critic of Saudi Arabia.

Opinion has shifted even further in the last few weeks: Congress has called for a Magnitsky investigation into Khashoggi's death, suggesting the potential for sanctions. Even Sen. Lindsey Graham, typically an ardent supporter of Saudi Arabia, vowed to “sanction the hell out of Saudi Arabia.” Ever the trigger-happy proponent of regime change, the senator even called for Mohammed bin Salman to be removed from power.

Certainly, the Saudi regime retains the support of the White House, which sees Saudi backing for the anti-Iran campaign and potential willingness to prop up oil prices as sufficient to win its loyalty. Yet Western companies are pulling their support for Saudi Arabia's Future Investment Initiative conference later in the month, and Saudi money is becoming increasingly toxic in Washington.

With the increasing divergence between Saudi and American interests, the Khashoggi murder offers an opportunity for lawmakers. Sanctions legislation, or legislation forbidding the use of U.S. forces to back the Saudi-led War in Yemen, would send a clear signal that Saudi behavior is unacceptable. It would lay the groundwork for a future administration to adopt a more balanced approach to the Middle East, one focused on stability, not on supporting the goals of any one state. And it would reorient American foreign policy to more accurately reflect the reality of the global oil market: that Saudi Arabia's future increasingly lies in selling its resources to Asia, not the West.

Once, the U.S.-Saudi marriage of convenience served both sides well. But it was just that — a marriage of convenience. With changes in the oil market and regional security, the rationale for the relationship has been diminishing for years. It has undoubtedly taken time for opinion in Congress and elsewhere to catch up to this reality. It may take longer still — into the next administration — for the White House to finally acknowledge that the Saudi alliance no longer serves U.S. needs. But the shock of Khashoggi's death has created an opening to reassess this alliance, highlighting that Americans have no shared values with Saudi Arabia, and perhaps, fewer shared interests than they thought.

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