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US support for Saudi Arabia is an unnecessary evil

Bonnie Kristian

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At first, Saudi Arabia had no idea what happened to journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Then, Riyadh announced he died in a “fist fight” gone wrong inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul — a regrettable accident, but an accident nonetheless. Then, the story changed again: Khashoggi’s death was premeditated, the Saudi government admitted. It was murder.

This last account was paired with a multitude of promises of accountability for those responsible, and the prospect of concrete consequences for U.S.-Saudi relations began to grow dim. For all the talk of “severe punishment,” Washington’s only remotely substantive response to the murder so far is the revocation of U.S. visas for a few Saudi officials thought to be involved. Sanctions may yet be coming, but President Trump has made it eminently clear he has no interest in administering perhaps the one lesson Riyadh would be sure to learn: ending American arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

That would be a serious missed opportunity. The tragedy of Khashoggi’s death presents a chance — a political moment — to rethink an alliance long since indefensible as a “necessary evil.” Maintaining close ties with Saudi Arabia is not needed for American security, and this murder is the latest evidence it is wrong.

Beyond the arms sales, the most visible manifestation of the U.S.-Saudi alliance is Washington’s support for Riyadh’s bloody intervention in the Yemeni civil war. There are two crucial points to understand about this conflict. The first is that American national security simply is not at stake. What is happening in Yemen is primarily a local fight. Yes, its outcome will have regional implications — a possible shift in the Sunni-Shiite balance of power is part of the Saudi-led coalition’s interest in intervention. But this is still a civil war. Its first concern is control of Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East. And wherever that control ends up, the situation in the United States will pretty much stay the same.

No conceivable outcome in Yemen puts U.S. vital interests at stake. Whoever wins, the U.S. will still be thousands of miles away, separated from Yemen by the Atlantic Ocean, flanked by friendly neighbors, and guarded by the most powerful military on the planet. What happens in Yemen matters, unquestionably, but it does not directly matter to U.S. security, which is ostensibly the focus of our foreign policy.

Indeed, insofar as there is any substantial connection between Yemen's conflict and American security, U.S. support for the Saudi intervention has made matters worse. It has created power vacuums in which al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula can flourish. In this way, U.S. and Saudi interference in Yemen has actually made us less safe. The threat AQAP poses to the U.S. should not be inflated, certainly, but if any element in Yemen has the intent and perhaps the means to conduct an attack on U.S. territory, it is AQAP — not the Yemeni government or the Houthi rebels fighting the civil war.

The second crucial point regarding Saudi intervention in Yemen is its obscene brutality toward the civilian population, which in the wake of Khashoggi's murder has finally begun to receive the attention it deserves.

Ordinary Yemenis are suffering the most acute humanitarian crisis on the planet. According to one estimate, one civilian gets killed every three hours just from the fighting, not counting those dying from disease or lack of food resulting from the conflict. Widespread man-made famine is imminent, infectious disease is running rampant, and medicine is in short supply. Yemen was never wealthy, but this level of suffering is new. It is inexcusable under any moral calculus, and the Saudi-led intervention is responsible.

It would be naive to suggest severing U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia would serve as some sort of panacea here. It might not end the Saudi intervention in Yemen, though certainly American material support is significant enough to make that a possibility. It would not eliminate AQAP, though it might well contribute to a quicker resolution in Yemen. And it would not, overnight, turn Riyadh into the sort of government that doesn't murder journalists and otherwise oppress its people.

But it would still be a step in the right direction to refuse the Saudi government the perception of legitimacy that American friendship and American weapons sales confer.

Khashoggi's death has prompted many to finally "admit that Saudi Arabia — a country they have long treated as a friend and partner — is little more than another murderous Middle East dictatorship," writes the Cato Institute's Emma Ashford. If the admission is serious, let Washington put words into action. End U.S.-Saudi arms deals. Withdraw support for the war in Yemen. And sunder ties with a dictatorship whose alliance does plenty of harm and offers us no good.