



Does The U.S. Really Need an Ally Like Saudi Arabia?

Doug Bandow

April 26, 2016

Despite recently expressing doubts about America's relationship with Saudi Arabia, President Barack Obama again flew to Riyadh and sought to "reassure" the Saudi royals about U.S. support.

In fact, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) raises the question: what are allies for? If the president wants to leave his mark on American foreign policy, he should have started moving Washington and Riyadh toward a more normal relationship.

Most important, the U.S. should drop any security guarantee, whether explicit or implicit. If the KSA is worth defending, its own people should do so. At the same time, the U.S. should take a more even-handed approach in the Iranian-Saudi cold war, looking for opportunities to draw Tehran away from Islamic extremism.

America's relationship with the KSA was always based on oil. But supplies are expanding; even the U.S. is going from net consumer to exporter. Anyway, a successor regime would sell to the highest bidder.

Saudi Arabia is supposed to promote regional stability, but intervened in Bahrain to block reforms by the Sunni monarchy for the Shia majority, funded radical insurgents in an attempt to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and is seeking to destabilize Lebanon's fragile confessional political system.

Worse, Riyadh has turned Yemen's long-running domestic conflict into a destructive sectarian battle with Iran. Unfortunately aiding the kingdom's brutal behavior could create future terrorists targeting America.

Since the 1979 overthrow of the Shah Washington has seen the KSA as a significant barrier to expansion by Tehran. However, the nuclear agreement creates important new opportunities.

Change will not come easily or quickly, given determined resistance in Tehran, but Iran is far more likely to evolve in a more liberal and democratic direction than Saudi Arabia. Security concerns will remain in the meantime, but monarchy has more to fear domestically than internationally.

The KSA also is nominally a leader in the war on terrorism. Yet Riyadh's attack on Yemen has empowered that nation's al-Qaeda affiliate. Moreover, domestic "anti-terrorism" efforts are directed at suppressing dissent more than violence.

Worse, Riyadh has underwritten Islamic radicalism around the world. The government funds fundamentalist madrassahs. Intolerant Wahhabist teaching creates the foundation for violence.

While the royal regime apparently has not directly supported terrorism, individual Saudis have, both funding and joining al-Qaeda. The George W. Bush administration refused to release a 28-page section of the 9/11 report detailing apparent Saudi support for terrorism. Wikileaks disclosures discussed the continuing flow of Saudi money to terrorists.

Finally, the kingdom does not share values with America, democratic or other. Saudi Arabia is at best a slightly more civilized variant of the Islamic State.

The latest Freedom House rated the KSA as "Not Free." The group said simply: "Political dissent is criminalized." Reported Human Rights Watch: "Saudi authorities continued arbitrary arrests, trials, and convictions of peaceful dissidents. Dozens of human rights defenders and activists continued to serve long prison sentences for criticizing authorities or advocating political and rights reforms." The State Department took 52 pages to detail Saudi human rights malpractices in its recently released annual report.

Religious freedom also doesn't exist. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted that "Saudi Arabia remains unique in the extent to which it restricts public expression of any religion other than Islam." At least there is liberty to violate in countries such as Iran. Not so in Saudi Arabia.

In practice, Saudi Arabia differs little than the Soviet Union. Both were totalitarian states animated by transcendent worldviews. Both regimes suppressed human liberty in service to those visions, one secular, and the other religious. The main difference is that the second posed a direct security threat to America, while the first sometimes interferes with U.S. interests indirectly.

None of this prevents Washington and Riyadh from cooperating. However, the U.S. should stop acting as supplicant.

The royals' continued rule, however advantageous for U.S. geopolitical interests in the short-term, is by no means vital to America in any meaningful sense of the word. The greatest danger for Washington may be the moral hazard from defending such a regime, encouraging it to resist needed reforms.

Would the U.S. "lose leverage" by disengaging? Riyadh is likely to do more if the U.S. drops its promise to defend the kingdom.

Which would be all to the good. America has spent decades attempting to micro-manage and geopolitically engineer the region, with disastrous results. Let Saudi Arabia spend its money and lives for a change.

President Obama wasted his final trip to the KSA pursuing politics as normal. Washington needs to put distance between America and its counterproductive partners, such as Riyadh.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire (Xulon).