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Saudi Arabia Needs the U.S. More Than the U.S. Needs Saudi Arabia

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

In fact, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia raises the question: what are allies for? If the president wants to leave his mark on American foreign policy, he should start on this trip. After all, he rightly criticized the KSA as among the many "free riders" on U.S. security guarantees. Washington and Riyadh should move to a more normal relationship. There no longer need be the pretense of intimate political friendship.

Instead, the two countries should work together when convenient. That might mean opposing the Islamic State while disagreeing over support for military dictatorship in Egypt. Washington should remain the KSA's chief arms merchant but should not aid Riyadh in attempting to oust the president of Syria and restore the ousted president of Yemen. Washington should target any evidence of terrorist financing, but not strip the kingdom of sovereign immunity regarding 9/11 law suits, as some in Congress would do.

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. Saudi Arabia still sells a lot of petroleum, but so what? The energy markets always have been global. Supplies are expanding with new sources like shale oil, new deposits beyond the Mideast, and renewed suppliers like Iran. Even the U.S. is going from net consumer to exporter.

During the Cold War one could at least imagine an improbable Soviet thrust to the Persian Gulf to cut off supplies to the West. Today the greatest threat to the kingdom is at home: the medieval, authoritarian system offers little to anyone not of exalted birth. The U.S. cannot protect the royals from their own people. 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 sectarian battle with Iran. The result has been a humanitarian horror, with most of the innocent casualties caused by Saudi bombing.

Observed Sarah Leah Whitson of Human Rights Watch: "it's undeniable that the Saudis are violating international law as they carry out attacks with no apparent military target and used banned weapons, such as cluster bombs. Aerial strikes have hit schools, hospitals, markets and homes. According to the U.N., they account for 60 percent of the 3,200 civilians killed in the conflict." A single attack on the market in the village of Mastaba on March 15 killed nearly 100 civilians, including 25 children. Unfortunately aiding the kingdom's lawless fight could create future terrorists targeting America.

Since the 1979 overthrow of the Shah Washington has seen the KSA as a significant and, after the ouster of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, probably most important, barrier to expansion by Tehran. Sadly, the U.S. bore more than its share of blame for creating the Iran of today, destroying Iranian democracy, supporting the Shah's corrupt, brutal rule, and backing Iraq's Saddam Hussein against the new Islamic republic. Official hostility masked the evolution of the Iranian population toward the West.

However, the nuclear agreement creates 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 the KSA has spent more than \$80 billion each of the last two years on a military, placing Riyadh fourth in the world in military expenditures. The 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, the kingdom showed little interest in battling al-Qaeda until the organization took on the royals directly. Domestic "anti-terrorism" efforts are directed at suppressing dissent more than violence. Kristine Beckerie of Human Rights Watch noted that "Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts have directly targeted human rights activists, sometimes forcibly enrolling them in 'thought rehabilitation' programs designed for terrorism suspects. Peaceful activists have been arrested, interrogated, and tried at Saudi Arabia's terrorism tribunal on speech-related charges like 'harming the reputation of the kingdom'."

Worse, Riyadh has underwritten Islamic radicalism around the world. The government funds fundamentalist madrassahs even in Europe and America. Intolerant Wahhabist teaching creates the foundation for violence. (Under pressure the kingdom is addressing intolerance in domestic school textbooks.) While the royal regime apparently has not directly supported terrorism, individual Saudis have, both funding and joining al-Qaeda (providing 15 of the 9/11 terrorists). The George W. Bush administration refused to release a 28-page section of the 9/11 report dealing with apparent Saudi support for terrorism. Wikileaks disclosures indicated that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged 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. Intolerance toward religious minorities, mistreatment of women, dictatorial politics, employment of religious police. What's the real difference?

The latest Freedom House rated the KSA as "Not Free," with bottom ratings for political rights and civil liberties. It 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."

Amnesty International pointed out that abuses started with detention and sometimes continued in prison: "Torture and other ill-treatment remained common and widespread, according to former detainees, trial defendants and others, and were used with impunity." Among the more celebrated cases were human rights activist and blogger Raef Badawi who was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes; his attorney, Waleed Abu al-Khair, later was imprisoned for 15 years. They are not alone.

The State Department took 52 pages to detail Saudi human rights malpractices in its recently released annual report. State's summary is brutal: "The most important human rights reported included citizens' lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination and lack of equal rights that affected all aspects of women's lives." Actually, that's only the start. There also are overcrowded prisons, detainee abuses, nonexistent judicial independence, political prisoners, "and arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence."

Religious freedom simply 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." Countries such as Iran are rightly criticized for their violations of religious liberty, but there is liberty to violate. Not so in Saudi Arabia.

All public expression by non-Muslims, including atheists, is banned. Noted USCIRF, the government "continues to prosecute and imprison individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery, and a new 2014 law classifies blasphemy and advocating atheism as terrorism." In its religious freedom report the State Department pointed to executions for "sorcery or 'black magic'." An activist promoting women's rights was arrested for "insulting Islam." Even private worship sometimes is interrupted and participants "harassed, detained, arrested, and occasionally deported," according to State.

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 only 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 kingdom has far greater need for America. The monarchy is ruthless

and cannot be counted out as a survivor, but it long has looked to the U.S. as its backstop. Witness arms sales and combat support for the misbegotten war in Yemen.

In contrast, 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. A worst-case implosion in the kingdom would be ugly for the Saudi people and their neighbors, but would most likely manifest itself in the U.S. primarily through higher energy prices. The greatest danger for Washington may be the moral hazard from defending such a regime, encouraging it to resist needed reforms. Despite occasional signs of progress, such as the recently announced decision to strip the religious police of the power to arrest, Saudi Arabia generally has moved backward since King Salman ascended the throne.

Would the U.S. "lose leverage" by disengaging? Riyadh already has exhibited a more assertive posture that Nawaf Obaid of the Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs called "the emerging Salman Doctrine." In fact, this policy appears to be driven by the king's favorite son, Mohammed bin Salman, both deputy crown prince and defense minister. The KSA is likely to do even more if the U.S. drops its promise to defend the kingdom.

In fact, that 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. And if Riyadh is unwilling to "share the neighborhood" with Iran, as the president put it, then the KSA should bear the consequences.

President Obama will waste his final trip to Saudi Arabia if he pursues politics as normal. Washington needs to put distance between America and its most counterproductive partners. Riyadh would be a good place to start.

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