



America Pays a High Moral & Material Price for Its Alliance With the Saudis

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In a no-nonsense analysis examining the high material, moral and ethical price Washington pays for its alliance with Saudi Arabia, Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow suggests that it's high time for the United States to abandon any illusions it might have about the nature of the Saudi regime, and ultimately, to disentangle itself from Riyadh.

Over the weekend, US Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in Saudi Arabia to discuss bilateral and regional issues with the country's senior leadership. Attempting to sooth the Saudis' concerns that the Iran nuclear deal may have undermined the Washington's commitment to Riyadh, Kerry emphasized that this wasn't the case.

"We have as solid a relationship, as clear an alliance, and as strong a friendship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as we ever had, and nothing has changed," Kerry said, quoted in a statement released by the State Department on Sunday.

This, according to Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow, is the exact opposite of the approach Washington needs to take when it comes to its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Bandow lays out his case in the Washington-based foreign policy magazine *The National Interest*.

"Washington's long relationship with Riyadh was built on oil," the analyst writes. However, "there was never any nonsense about sharing values with the KSA, which operates as a slightly more civilized variant of the Islamic State. For instance, heads are chopped off, but only after a nominal trial. Women have no more rights, but can afford a better life."

The reality, Bandow, notes, is that "the royals run a totalitarian system which prohibits political dissent, free speech, religious liberty and social autonomy. In its latest human rights report, the U.S. State Department devoted an astonishing 57 pages detailing the Saudi monarchy's human rights abuses. To the extent that personal freedom exists, it is only in private. But even then the authorities may intervene at pleasure."

"At a time of heavy US dependence on foreign oil, a little compromise in America's principles might have seemed in order," the analyst, a former special advisor to the president during the Reagan administration, slyly noted.

However, "even then, of course, the KSA could not control the international oil market and the royals could not long survive if they did not sell their oil. They needed buyers as much, if not more than, buyers needed them."

"Today, however, it's hard to make a case that petroleum warrants Washington's 'special relationship' with Saudi Arabia. The global energy market is expanding; Iran has begun selling more oil; new sources such as tight oil have come on line; US crude oil production is the highest it has been in decades. Most important, the royal regime cannot survive without oil revenues and has continued to pump even as prices have collapsed."

From the geostrategic tack, Bandow recalled that Washington has used Riyadh in recent years "as an integral component of a containment system against Iran. Of course, much of the 'Tehran problem' was made in America: overthrowing Iranian democracy and empowering the Shah, a corrupt, repressive modernizer, led to his ouster and the creation of an Islamist state. Washington's subsequent support for Iraq's Saddam Hussein in his aggressive war against Iran only intensified the Islamist regime's antagonism."

"Fears multiplied as Tehran confronted its Sunni neighbors along with Israel and continued the Shah's nuclear program. Overwrought nightmares of Islamic revolution throughout the region encouraged America's fulsome embrace of the KSA and allied regimes, such as Bahrain, where a Shia majority is held captive by a Sunni monarch backed by the Saudi military."

Held captive by such strategic considerations, "in Riyadh, Secretary Kerry [thus] declared America's undiminished support for the world's leading feudal kleptocracy."

However, as with oil, the case for Washington's need to support Riyadh due to geopolitics has also "become quite threadbare. The regime opposes Iran for its own reasons, not to aid America. And Saudi Arabia is well able to do so. In 2014, the country came in at world number four with \$81 billion in military expenditures, a multiple of Iran's total," which was only about \$15 billion in the same year.

The reality, Bandow argues, is that the real threats to the monarchy, domestic in nature and "beyond Washington's reach," include "the kingdom's general repression and particular mistreatment of its Shia minority." This was demonstrated, the analyst recalls, by "the recent execution of cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who urged nonviolent opposition to the monarchy." As for the government in Tehran, whatever hesitation Washington might have about the Islamic Republic, "in contrast to the KSA, there are (carefully circumscribed but real nonetheless) elections, political debate, religious diversity, generational resistance and liberal sentiments." In fact, the analyst shrewdly suggests, "shifting the US relationship with Iran could dramatically improve the region's dynamic."

A High Material and Moral Price to Pay

Ultimately, Bandow writes, "whatever the alleged benefits of the Saudi alliance, America pays a high price."

"First is the cost of providing free bodyguards for the royals. For this reason the United States initiated the first Gulf War and left a garrison on Saudi soil. The inconclusive end of that conflict led to continual bombing of Iraq even during 'peacetime' and ultimately the Iraq invasion. At the Saudis' behest, Washington backs their misbegotten war in Yemen and remains formally committed to the overthrow of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, the strongest force opposing the far more dangerous Islamic State."

"Saudi Arabia also tramples American values beyond its own borders. In next-door Bahrain, Riyadh helped suppress the majority Shia population and in more distant Egypt the Saudis subsidized renewed military rule. The KSA also has underwritten extremist Islamic teaching in madrasahs around the world (Sunnis account for roughly 85 percent of all Muslims). Even Iran never attempted to so effectively create an entire generation of extremists. Moreover, Saudi money backed Al Qaeda and Saudis were among the 9/11 attackers. Similar private support for extremist violence apparently continues. Yet Washington shields the kingdom's practices from scrutiny, refusing to release the section of the 9/11 report discussing Saudi funding of terrorism."

In the last few years especially, the analyst notes, "Riyadh's behavior has become more harmful to America's interests. The monarchy has been pushing to oust Syria's Assad without worrying about who or what would follow. To the contrary, Riyadh had subsidized and armed many of the most extreme opposition factions." Furthermore, "in Yemen, Saudi Arabia turned a long-term insurgency into another sectarian conflict. In the process, the royals have been committing war crimes and creating a humanitarian disaster."

As for the Kingdom's execution of cleric Nimr, it has "triggered sectarian protests in Bahrain, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon," with Riyadh's subsequent break in diplomatic relations with Iran "undermining political negotiations to resolve Syria's civil war. Yet after all this, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir criticized 'the mischief that Iran's nefarious activities can do in the region.'"

US President Barack Obama speaks with King Salman (L) of Saudi Arabia during their meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, DC on September 4, 2015

In the final analysis, Bandow notes, the United States and Saudi Arabia need a new relationship, one based on pragmatism and realpolitik.

Foreign Minister Jubeir had opined that he doesn't "believe the United States is under any illusion as to what type of government Iran is." Nor, the analyst suggested, "should Washington have any illusions about the nature of the Saudi regime. The two governments should work together when advantageous and disagree when appropriate. Sell weapons to Riyadh without committing to provide a royal bodyguard. Most important, Washington should feel no inhibition in attempting to forge a better relationship with Tehran. Balance should return to American policy in the Middle East."

As a caveat, Bandow recommends that whatever Washington does, recognizing Riyadh's role as a destabilizing force in the Middle East "does not mean that the United States should attempt regime change...America has proved that it isn't very good at overseas social engineering – consider Afghanistan, Egypt, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo, Libya, Somalia, Syria and elsewhere." But at the very minimum, Washington must "stop lavishing attention, praise, support, and reassurance on the Saudi royals."