



Saudi Arabia's Royal Dictatorship Threatens American Interests and Values

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The world is filled with many oppressive tyrants, determined to rule irrespective of the desires of their peoples. Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, or MbS as the crown prince is known, is one. Shockingly, he enjoys Washington's full protection.

President Donald Trump's warped belief that Riyadh is a key ally has caused the Trump administration to make Americans accomplices to MbS's many crimes. The president's fulsome endorsement of Saudi Arabia's ostentatiously selfish, aggressive, and brutal dictatorship also is undermining America's security.

The most dramatic example of Washington's moral and practical bankruptcy in dealing with the Saudi royals was the aftermath of MbS's October 2018 slice & dice operation against journalist Jamal Khashoggi, then a resident of America, conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate. MbS made a terrible murder uniquely monstrous by turning a diplomatic facility into a gruesome abattoir and employing the gang of killers who included a specialist on how to dispose of bodies. The crime gained worldwide attention and earned MbS global opprobrium. However, Trump's policy remained unchanged: the greater the Saudi crime, the more intensive the administration cover-up.

Previously unknown, Riyadh apparently attempted a replay of the Khashoggi murder just a couple weeks later. Saad al-Jabri, a top intelligence operative of the former crown prince, Mohammed al-Nayaf, wisely fled the Kingdom when MbS pushed al-Nayaf aside in 2017. The regime then pressed for al-Jabri's return, since he knows where the (all too real) bodies are buried. He would never be seen again if he accepted MbS's "hospitality."

So the KSA attempted to get Interpol, the international police agency, to issue a warrant for al-Jabri's arrest, but the organization rejected the request as "politically motivated." The regime arrested and tortured some of al-Jabri's relatives, including his brother, and took his two youngest children hostage, preventing them from traveling abroad and even "disappearing" them in March. Moreover, as al-Jabri details in a lawsuit filed in federal court, two years ago the crown prince sent his personal "tiger squad," or hit team, to Canada, where al-Jabri lives, to do a "Khashoggi" on him. The murder crew arrived on tourist visas, carried two bags of "tools," and was accompanied by a forensics expert schooled in body dismemberment.

Donald Trump once seemed to understand Saudi Arabia. For instance, more than three decades ago he complained of the Kingdom, along with other allied states: "these very, very wealthy countries that we're projecting should pay for their own defense. They should pay us for the defense, or they should defend themselves." He was essentially right, though rather than hire out U.S. troops as mercenaries, Washington should insist that such governments do what normal nations do, defend themselves. If they have trouble doing so, they should adopt reforms which convince their people that the government is worth supporting.

However, Saudi cash seemed to change his opinion. During the presidential campaign he commented: "Saudi Arabia – and I get along great with all of them. They buy apartments from me. They spend \$40 million, \$50 million. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much." Once in office he highlighted Riyadh's arms purchases from America, greatly exaggerating the amount and its impact on job creation. Yet bolstering the munitions industry is no better justification for helping a tyrannical regime imprison and dismember its own people and visit murder and mayhem on its neighbors.

The November 3 election could end MbS's criminally privileged status. Last year Joe Biden cited the Khashoggi murder, which he forthrightly ascribed to the crown prince, and stated: "I would make it very clear we were not going to, in fact, sell more weapons to them, we were going to, in fact make them pay the price and make them, in fact, the pariah that they are. There's very little social redeeming value of the – in the present government of Saudi Arabia."

Of course, the Saudi royals have lobbied their way past presidential criticism before. For instance, once elected Trump assumed a permanently subservient position, operating at Riyadh's beck and call. It is worrisome that Biden was part of the Obama administration, which originally backed the Kingdom's murderous assault on Yemen.

However, a Trumpesque flip would be much less likely by Biden. His party sharply criticized the criminal regime in Riyadh, in contrast to congressional Republicans, who joined the president in a party-wide kowtow. Moreover, Biden's promise to act against Saudi Arabia was both more explicit, focused on MbS, and tied to human rights. He might even try a rather genteel effort at regime change, urging King Salman to replace MbS with a less murderous and temerarious heir.

America's relationship with Saudi Arabia originated at the end of World War II, which left Washington in a dominant position after Great Britain's geopolitical and financial collapse. The US became the Kingdom's new best friend. The quid pro quo was simple: America wanted a stable oil supply and the KSA wanted regional stability.

There were occasional disagreements, over Israel, for instance, which prompted the 1973 oil embargo. However, the Saudis leaned West out of fear of both communism and Islamic radicalism. In 1990 the US intervened against Iraq largely to protect the Saudi royals, whose people showed little interest in defending the regime. Yet much Saudi money still went to al-Qaeda and other extremist groups and 15 of the 19 9/11 terrorists were Saudis. But after al-Qaeda targeted the royals, they finally understood that they could no longer play soft on terrorism. Riyadh opposed the 2003 Iraq war, recognizing at least some of the challenges to come.

Through everything US administrations remained strangely protective of the absolute monarchy with rule as totalitarian as any communist state, denying the slightest political or religious liberty

and exercising extraordinary social control. In one memorable photo, George W. Bush and King Abdullah held hands after meeting in April 2005 at the former's Texas ranch. Seemingly nothing could shake the friendly relationship.

Until recently little changed. President Barack Obama was more skeptical of the regime but bowed on meeting the king and backed Riyadh's war against Yemen to counteract the Kingdom's opposition to the nuclear deal with Iran. Supporting MbS's campaign of brutal military aggression was a particularly foolish move. As Robert Gates warned, the Saudi royals always want America to fight Iran to the last American.

However, the crown prince transformed the royal regime and bilateral relationship, turning a low-key, collegial, family-oriented authoritarian state into a virulent personal dictatorship. Explained journalist Ben Hubbard, MbS destroyed the old "system, extending his control over the military, the oil industry, the intelligence services, the police, and the National Guard, replacing senior prince with younger one who answered to him."

Although MbS relaxed social controls, he tightened political restrictions. Now commentators get arrested for staying silent when they are expected to lavishly praise him. No one other than Sunni Muslims are free to worship publicly, while private religious gatherings risk invasion and participants face arrest.

Even Donald Trump's State Department admitted the Kingdom's pervasive brutality: "Significant human rights issues included: unlawful killings; executions for nonviolent offenses; forced disappearances; torture of prisoners and detainees by government agents; arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy; criminalization of libel, censorship, and site blocking; restrictions on freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and movement; severe restrictions of religious freedom; citizens' lack of ability and legal means to choose their government through free and fair elections; trafficking in persons; violence and official discrimination against women, although new women's rights initiatives were implemented; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity; and prohibition of trade unions."

This is the government to which the president currently subcontracts US policy toward Iran and the Persian Gulf.

Of course, Washington long has allied with viciously repressive regimes, most notably the Soviet Union during World War II and a gaggle of right-leaning states during the Cold War. In theory, at least, these relationships were expected to advance American security. However, allowing the Kingdom to set American strategy makes the US decidedly less safe. The relationship is a net geopolitical negative.

Washington's initial attraction to the Kingdom was oil. With the transformation of the international energy marketplace the KSA lost its stranglehold. Riyadh provides useful intelligence, its admirers aver, but the vulnerable royals also benefit from America acting on such information. Cooperation on shared interests is not a reason for the US to treat its troops as a royal bodyguard for hire.

Moreover, America's other authoritarian "friends" usually do not encourage widespread hatred of the US. The Saudis do, funding promotion of the intolerant Wahhabist theology around the globe, even in America. Although Wahhabism does not directly advocate terrorism, its

demonization of the other – Christian, Jew, Shia, and other non-Sunnis – is a precursor to intolerance and violence.

In terms of foreign policy, the Saudi royals were historically cautious and conservative. They most cared about maintaining their positions, wealth, luxuries, and privileges against a generally quiescent population. A corollary was to combat unrest against other Sunni regimes, hence abundant subsidies for Egypt's military dictatorship under Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and military backing for Bahrain's repressive, minority Sunni monarchy, sitting atop an angry Shia-majority population.

However, MbS wanted more, a lot more, and his policies have proved to be extraordinarily destabilizing and dangerous. He kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister, backed jihadist insurgents in Syria, and promoted civil war in Libya. His attempt to turn neighbor Qatar into a puppet state caused it to increase its ties to Turkey and Iran. Worst of all, in 2015 he launched an aggressive war against Yemen, to restore a puppet regime to power.

The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe, with mass malnutrition, disease, and death. The geopolitical consequences have been equally horrendous. After spending a half century intervening in its neighbor's affairs Riyadh accused Iran of "meddling." MbS's attempted conquest transformed persistent domestic unrest – Yemenis have been battling each other since the modern nation arose in the 1960s – into an international sectarian war. The KSA and its allies, most notably the United Arab Emirates, assisted al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups, even providing them with U.S.-supplied weapons. The UAE also backed separatists seeking to break up Yemen, who have battled the nominal government supported by MbS.

Finally, MbS demonstrated that the Saudi state is a paper tiger. His military legions had about as much success against the world's poorest nation as Benito Mussolini's Italy had when invading Greece in 1940. Riyadh has spent lavishly on prestige American weapons, but the military is mostly a vanity force. So MbS sought rescue through support from the US Which explains why the Saudi royals so desperately rely on American military protection: most Saudis have no interest in dying for a pampered elite which squanders national resources on personal pleasures.

Yet when Congress opposed additional arms transfers, the administration, desperately determined to aid Riyadh's murderous campaign, resumed its submissive position, falsely claiming an "emergency" and rushing through the transfers without congressional approval. The acting inspector general concluded that abandoning usual procedures based on a lie was not illegal, but the State Department "did not fully assess risks and implement mitigation measures to reduce civilian casualties and legal concerns associated with the transfer."

There also is concern that the KSA might be pursuing nuclear weapons. It wants to develop nuclear power but without agreeing to standard safeguards. Moreover, reported the *New York Times*, an analysis by US intelligence agencies "has raised alarms that there might be secret Saudi-Chinese efforts to process raw uranium into a form that could later be enriched into weapons fuel." That might be necessary for an indigenous nuclear weapon, but it is widely believed that Saudi support for Pakistan's nuclear developments already ensures the transfer of existing bombs whenever the royals call Islamabad. Imagine the horrific depredations that someone like MbS could wreak if he possessed nukes. There would be a better case for Washington to bomb Saudi Arabia than Iran.

America's support for the Saudi Islamic dictatorship is a moral disaster. The Kingdom is a security minus for the US. The regime promotes Wahhabist fundamentalism, encouraging Muslims around the world to target America and other Western nations. The country's current ruler is irresponsible, rash, and arrogant, a prescription for further Mideast disasters. Washington should stop treating Riyadh as an important ally or genuine friend.

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