

## Washington's Shameful Fondness for Saudi Arabia

Why is Trump expanding the U.S. alliance with the Kingdom?

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President Trump's state visit to Riyadh and his actions there should deeply trouble all Americans. The president not only inked a deal to sell the Kingdom \$110 billion in U.S. armaments, but he greatly intensified the overall security relationship. He proposed a Middle East version of NATO—a thinly disguised, Saudi-led alliance against Iran—and indicated that there would be strong U.S. backing for that association. Trump also celebrated the establishment in Riyadh of a global center to combat extremism.

It is difficult to justify those measures on the basis of rational U.S. security calculations. It is impossible to do so on the basis of any decent moral considerations. Unfortunately, President Trump is perpetuating and intensifying an extremely questionable bilateral relationship that has gone on for decades.

Saudi Arabia is an exceptionally duplicitous power that cannot be considered a U.S. ally, much less a friend. Indeed, given the Kingdom's track record of promoting Islamic radicalism, building a center to combat global extremism in Riyadh is akin to having placed a center to combat fascism in 1930s Rome or Berlin. As Malou Innocent and I document in our book, *Dubious Partners*, the Saudi regime abets extremism in multiple ways. Riyadh has funded schools (madrassa) in various Muslim countries for decades to promote the Wahhabi religious cult that has intimate ties with the royal family. Wahhabi clerics indoctrinate youth in a most virulent anti-Western perspective.

Numerous analysts have noted that 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9-11 were Saudi nationals, but that was hardly the extent of Riyadh's culpability. Some Saudi officials had at least a disturbingly tolerant relationship with Al Qaeda for years before those terrorist attacks. And the promotion of armed extremist groups did not begin or end with that association. As early as the 1980s, Riyadh made a concerted effort, in collusion with Pakistan, to make sure that the bulk of the financial and military assistance that Washington was providing Afghan insurgents resisting the Soviet occupation went to the most extreme Islamist factions. More recently, Riyadh backed extremist forces trying to unseat the governments of Iraq and Syria. Some of those groups eventually coalesced to form ISIS.

In terms of moral considerations, Washington's de facto alliance with Saudi Arabia is even less justified. Riyadh has a dreadful human-rights record, not only treating women and religious minorities in a shabby fashion, but routinely imprisoning and executing even peaceful critics of the regime. The Saudi-led war in Yemen has been characterized by deliberate attacks on civilians and an assortment of other war crimes, including the use of banned cluster bombs. Washington's willingness to endorse Riyadh's military campaign, and even provide logistical support to it, makes America an accomplice in those atrocities.

Some of the U.S. emphasis on close ties with Saudi Arabia reflects the ongoing American obsession with viewing Iran as a mortal threat to stability in the Middle East. That simplistic perspective misconstrues the nature of a Sunni-Shiite struggle for dominance in the region. Washington has always favored Saudi Arabia in that contest, but Trump's actions makes the bias far more pronounced. That is a mistake on both a strategic and a moral level. There are far more Sunnis than Shiites in the Middle East, and thanks to Saudi Arabia, there are also even more Sunni extremists than Shiite extremists. The United States should not have a dog in an Iranian-Saudi fight, but if the Trump administration felt it had to pick a side, it probably chose the wrong one. Fostering an Arab NATO puts America in the middle of not only the current Sunni-Shiite struggle, but even more long-standing Arab-Persian tensions. Moreover, tilting toward the stronger side is counterproductive if Washington's goal is greater stability. It is as myopic as if Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had decided to tilt toward the Soviet Union rather than China in that bilateral feud.

Iran is hardly an admirable power, but the U.S. refrain that Tehran is the chief state sponsor of terrorism is overdone. Indeed, given Riyadh's track record, Saudi Arabia may be a stronger candidate for that title. Domestically, Iran is certainly a repressive society, but it does have some features of openness. Women have a better status there than in the Saudi kingdom, and there are competitive (if constrained) elections featuring candidates with different views. None of that is allowed in Saudi Arabia.

Trump and his advisers seem oblivious to all of this. A key illustration came when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson held a joint press conference with the Saudi foreign minister. All American journalists (who might ask the Saudi official probing questions) were excluded. Tillerson spent much of the session condemning Iran for supporting terrorism and practicing repression at home. The secretary admonished the Iranians to withdraw their backing from terrorist groups and move toward greater democracy and freedom domestically.

To criticize Iran for its domestic failings while on the same platform with an official of a totalitarian theocracy was appalling. Saudi Arabia makes Iran, for all its faults and repressive aspects, look like a Jeffersonian democracy. Even if Tillerson had no sense of shame, he should at least have had a sense of irony in lecturing Tehran in the setting he chose.

The close U.S. association with Saudi Arabia has long been a stain on America's honor. Trump and Tillerson have deepened that stain.

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