



US should balance Iran and Saudi Arabia

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When running for president, Donald Trump was no less critical of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia than he was of America's dependent Asian and European allies. It looked like bilateral relations would change.

But now President Trump appears to be working for the Saudi monarchy. He recently said he expects the Iranians to call him to make a deal, but we should hope not, lest the administration enshrine Saudi hegemony in the Middle East.

The kingdom deserved candidate Trump's scorn. It is a corrupt totalitarian state, long tied financially to terrorists, yet it treats U.S. soldiers as the royals' personal bodyguard.

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates recalled meeting King Abdullah: "He wanted a full-scale attack on Iranian military targets, not just the nuclear sites." This supposed friend of America "was asking the United States to send its sons and daughters into a war with Iran in order to protect the Saudi position in the Gulf and the region, as if we were mercenaries."

When President Trump was elected it looked like the Saudis' free ride might be over. However, the president's first trip was to Riyadh, where he partied the night away while doing the "sword dance." Then he peered into the orb, the curious symbol of Saudi Arabia's new anti-radicalism center.

Given the president's reaction, some observers speculated that the Saudis had acquired the infamous Eye of Sauron after the destruction of Mordor. President Trump subsequently appeared to have fallen completely under Riyadh's spell.

Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia is a totalitarian state. There is no political or religious liberty, far less than in its infamous rival Iran.

Only recently has the crown prince relaxed some social controls. While simultaneously cracking down on critics of the monarchy, including women who campaigned against some of the policies he initiated. Politically, Saudi Arabia is now less free.

While claiming to combat corruption Mohammad bin Salman has spent lavishly on a yacht and chateau, and apparently art as well. Presumably short on cash, he arrested hundreds of the kingdom's elite and he initiated an extraordinary shakedown, demanding that those arrested sign over substantial assets to win their freedom.

What Riyadh does overseas should be of even greater concern to Washington, however. Over the years Saudi Arabia has spent some \$100 billion to promote the extremist Wahhabist variant of Islam around the world, including in the U.S.

Saudi money and personnel long infused terrorist movements, most notably al-Qaida. Saudi Arabia had little concern when only Westerners seemed to be at risk. Now the kingdom purports to be a crusader against terrorism, criticizing Qatar because the latter underwrites critics of the monarchy, who the royals consider to be "terrorists."

Moreover, MbS, as the crown prince is known, has proved to be a reckless adventurer, ever-ready to destabilize countries, launch wars, brutalize civilians, underwrite tyranny, and commit any crime to enhance his nation's influence. The attack on Yemen, to return a puppet regime to power, may be Riyadh's most irresponsible act of late.

Saudi Arabia also backed radical Islamist insurgents in an attempt to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, essentially the same strategy which turned disastrously wrong in both Iraq and Libya. Riyadh intervened militarily to support Bahrain's authoritarian, minority Sunni monarchy against the majority Shia population.

Yet the Trump administration apparently has anointed the monarchy as its agent. It is reminiscent of the bad ole' days of Iran's Shah. The U.S. helped install him — Iranians still remember the 1953 coup against democracy — but his arrogant and criminal reign led to his downfall, and the creation of the Islamist Republic.

There's no need for Washington to take sides between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo essentially demanded the former's surrender: accept Saudi hegemony, disarm in the face of superior Saudi military force, abandon its few regional allies, and beg for Washington's and Riyadh's mercy. Why this favoritism toward the Saudi dictatorship?

The U.S. claims to fear Iranian dominance in the Middle East, but that neither threatens America — which is a superpower, if anyone has forgotten — nor is likely to. The Islamic Republic is beset with domestic economic and political difficulties. Its alleged foreign "empire" is made up of geopolitical dregs that no one else wants, while its Mideast adversaries are many.

Candidate Trump appeared to understand Saudi Arabia. President Trump acts like any other submissive royal retainer. Instead of campaigning to hand the Middle East over to the Saudi royals, the Trump administration should stand for America's and its allies' interests.

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