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Moral Hazard: the United States and Saudi Arabia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of President Donald Trump's tenure, the United States and Saudi Arabia have experienced an unprecedented level of partnership. It has seemingly also been Saudi Arabia's most controversial era on the world stage, with its continued military campaigns in the Yemeni Civil War, involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and blockade of Qatar. These actions have largely been met either with apathy or support from senior Trump officials and there have been few tangible challenges to the kingdom's conduct from the current administration.

This cycle of permissiveness on the part of the United States and subsequent recklessness from the emboldened kingdom is an example of moral hazard, which refers to an arrangement in which actors are not incentivized to guard against risk because they perceive they will be shielded from the consequences of their actions. The United States's financial ties to the kingdom through arms deals—and the fact that its relationship with Saudi Arabia is a counterbalance to Iranian influence in the region—is effectively the kingdom's insurance policy. With the confidence it has developed from this unwavering American support, Saudi Arabia has little incentive to change its conduct in the region.

President-elect Biden and Congress will face new opportunities to challenge our morally hazardous relationship with Saudi Arabia. It isn't necessary to cease relations with the nation entirely. For instance, if Biden were to develop diplomatic ties with Iran as a challenge to Saudi Arabia, he could leverage his relationships with either country against the other. But, by ceasing arms sales to the kingdom, Biden could send a clear signal that the Saudi-led coalition's conduct in Yemen is outside the bounds of acceptable behavior. Whether Biden chooses to pursue these tactics or others, what will prove most effective in compelling Saudi Arabia to change its ways will be political and diplomatic approaches that convey that the U.S. may no longer be as securely on the kingdom's side as it has been during the Trump years.

Historical Context

The history of United States-Saudi Arabian relations has contributed to a modern relationship rooted in moral hazard. Typically a subject of economic study, moral hazard refers to situations in which actors are willing to engage in risky behavior because they feel that something will shield them from the consequences of their actions. The concept can offer both useful explanations of the past and current relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, as well as offer policy prescriptions for the future. Though this cycle has been deeply visible during the Trump administration, events of the past several decades have entrenched the two nations in their current state.

In large part, formal relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia bloomed from a five-hour-long meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud on February 14, 1945.¹ The two heads of state met aboard the USS Quincy along the Suez Canal in the hopes of forging a strategic relationship. They arrived at the following arrangement: In return for offering security to Saudi Arabia, the U.S. was granted access to affordable energy resources.² Through many changes of power in both countries, these transactions have continued. Indeed, one of President Roosevelt's gifts to King Abdul Aziz—a DC-3 passenger airplane—would be indicative of the relationship to come.³

In 1951, American and Saudi authorities began to inch closer to the current state of relations. Both nations became increasingly concerned about Marxist and nationalist movements in the Middle East, and opting to face those threats together, they signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement.⁴ The early implementation of this agreement saw the creation of the United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) of 1953, which remains a critical component of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.⁵ The USMTM is tasked with training Saudi Arabian defense forces in order to support regional security.⁶ Ever since 1977, a Memorandum of Understanding has governed the relationship that exists between the USMTM and the Saudi Ministry of Defense and Aviation.⁷ Various U.S. agencies were installed in Riyadh and other major cities as a result of these early agreements. American staff have since been assigned

to assist the nation in advisory, air defense, naval, ground combat, and communications capacities.⁸

The American military presence in Saudi Arabia peaked during the Gulf War of 1991. After Saddam Hussein successfully took control of Kuwait in 1990, many nations became concerned that the oil reserves of Saudi Arabia would soon be in jeopardy.⁹ The United States and Saudi Arabia coordinated a deployment of U.S. troops to the kingdom in order to protect the peninsula.¹⁰ As part of an international coalition, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia collaborated in February 1991 to liberate Kuwait from Saddam's occupation.¹¹ On March 2, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that lay the groundwork for a ceasefire.¹² Though Saddam had launched attacks on coalition bases in Saudi Arabia, his forces never invaded the kingdom.^{13,14}

Since the turn of the millennium, relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia have faced a number of challenges. Animosity toward the kingdom began to rise in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, given Saudi involvement.^{15,16} Questions began to arise due to the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis.¹⁷ Only recently, when the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on Saudi connections to the attacks was declassified in 2016, did the kingdom's ties become clearer. According to the "28 pages," some of the hijackers "were in contact with, and received support or assistance from" figures in the Saudi government, including at least two officials "alleged by some to be Saudi intelligence officers."¹⁸

Moral Hazard: the Present Era

Support for the Saudi-Led Coalition in the Yemeni Civil War

In 2015, the Obama administration continued the historical precedent of the United States offering support to Saudi Arabia during conflicts. Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was a long-time nemesis of Saudi Arabia; as the Arab Spring came to a head with Saleh being ousted, Mansur Hadi replaced him as president and a domestic power struggle broke out.¹⁹ Saudi Arabia formed a coalition and threw its support behind Hadi, while Iran backed Saleh and the Houthis, a Yemeni militia group. When the Saudi-led

coalition first began its intervention in March 2015, the United States committed to providing “logistical and intelligence support” without taking “direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort.”²⁰

Early in the conflict, Saudi officials predicted that fighting in Yemen would be over in a matter of weeks.²¹ The war still rages on five years later. On June 9, 2020, Trump reported to Congress, “A small number of United States military personnel are deployed to Yemen to conduct operations against al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS.”²² The president stated that this deployment was in accordance with the War Powers Resolution.²³ In addition to this presence in Yemen, the United States also continues to provide “military advice and limited information, logistics, and other support to regional forces combatting the Houthis.”²⁴ There are approximately 3,600 United States forces currently stationed in Saudi Arabia.²⁵



President Donald Trump meets with Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and members of his delegation, Tuesday, March 14, 2017, in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C.

Current Arms Deals

Security formed one of the first pillars of collaboration between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and this aspect of relations between the two countries has grown significantly over time. The United States has been the world’s largest arms exporter since the 1990s.²⁶ Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has not only become the biggest recipient of American arms, but the biggest weapons importer in the world.^{27,28} Between 2013 and 2017, 18.7 percent of all American weapons sales went to Saudi Arabia.²⁹ In 2017 alone, this amounted to around \$18 billion

in deals with the kingdom—equivalent to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s GDP in the same year.^{30,31}

As arms deals have increased, so have the controversies that surround them. Backed by American weapons, Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies have conducted airstrikes, blocked ports, and halted the transfer of vital goods in Yemen.³² Aircraft once made up the largest share of U.S. arms sales. But under Trump, bombs and missiles have taken the lead.³³ Despite challenges from Congress, Trump has continued to forge lucrative deals with the kingdom and at one point issued an emergency declaration in order to process a sale without congressional approval.³⁴

Morally Hazardous Actions Committed by Saudi Arabia

The Yemeni Civil War

Saudi Arabia first intervened in Yemen militarily in 2015, after Houthi rebels forced President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and his government to flee Sana’a.³⁵ Since then, the nation has been embroiled in what United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has dubbed the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis.”³⁶ Out of a national population of 28 million people, 20 million currently experience food insecurity and 10 million are on the brink of famine.³⁷ Cholera, dengue, and malnourishment have ravaged the country since the civil war began. Those conditions often go untreated now that only half of the nation’s medical facilities are fully functioning.³⁸

Saudi involvement is not entirely to blame for the widespread devastation Yemen grapples with. However, as of early 2020, the United Nations reported that over 60 percent of all civilian deaths in Yemen were a result of airstrikes conducted by the coalition led by Saudi Arabia.³⁹ Many of the most controversial Saudi strikes on civilian targets in Yemen were conducted with American-made weapons, including attacks on a school bus, a wedding, and various homes and farms over the years.^{40,41} As much as one third of all airstrikes conducted by the coalition targeted civilian locales like food storage facilities, schools, and medical centers.⁴²

The Saudi-led coalition had already used American-made weapons in questionable ways, but in 2019 it came to light that the kingdom and its partners had transferred American arms to al-Qaeda fighters, Salafi militias, and other opponents in Yemen.⁴³ Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have used these weapons to win the favor of local groups and influence Yemen's political landscapes, according to a CNN report.⁴⁴ Department of Defense arms deal regulations dictate that military equipment cannot be passed along to third parties.⁴⁵ These transfers have driven demand for sophisticated American weapons, keeping the cycle of violence in Yemen ongoing.⁴⁶

Jamal Khashoggi

Jamal Khashoggi was a well-known Saudi journalist who lived in the United States under self-imposed exile after falling out of favor with the Saudi government.⁴⁷ In a monthly column for *The Washington Post*, Khashoggi often criticized the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.⁴⁸ He feared being punished by Saudi Arabia for his dissent and said as much in his first column for *The Washington Post*.⁴⁹ After entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 in order to obtain an official document, Khashoggi never exited the building.⁵⁰ Saudi officials—including the crown prince—initially denied any knowledge of what had happened to Khashoggi, but eventually capitulated that he had died in a “fight.”⁵¹

A Saudi prosecutor involved in the resulting investigations blamed the murder on rogue operatives.⁵² But according to a United Nations report on the murder, “Evidence points to the 15-person mission to execute Mr. Khashoggi requiring significant government coordination, resources and finances.... Saudi high-level officials planned, oversaw and/or endorsed the mission.”⁵³ A month after Khashoggi's murder, the CIA corroborated the UN's findings and concluded that Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the assassination.⁵⁴ This insight came from intercepted phone calls, among them a conversation in which the crown prince's brother Khalid bin Salman requested that Khashoggi visit the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.⁵⁵

Qatar

Just two weeks after President Trump's touted visit to Saudi Arabia, the kingdom engaged in a con-

troversial blockade of Qatar and expulsion of Qatari citizens. In April 2017, Qatar made a ransom payment to an Iraqi Shiite militant group affiliated with Kata'ik Hezbollah in exchange for the return of twenty-eight hostages.^{56,57} This action only added to a persistent regional belief that Qatar is in league with extremist groups. While Qatar admits that it contributes to the Muslim Brotherhood, it has denied supporting militant groups that are affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates opted to cut diplomatic relations with Qatar.⁵⁹

Following President Trump's demonstration of solidarity with the kingdom, Saudi Arabia was emboldened. The kingdom and its partners in the blockade expelled Qatari residents, prevented Qatari aircraft from entering their airspace, and shut down borders and ports.⁶⁰ As part of its terms for ending the blockade, Saudi Arabia and company have demanded that Qatar end its ties with Iran. Qatar resisted, citing its economic reliance on Tehran—and as a result of the tension, Doha has developed closer ties with Tehran, restoring full diplomatic relations and expressing support for some of Iran's more controversial activities, such as its nuclear program.⁶¹ Doha has called the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian impositions—which include political, trade, and travel embargos—attempts to limit Qatari sovereignty.⁶²

Qatar has been a key ally to the United States in its activities in the Middle East, particularly with regard to interactions with rebel groups in the region. Doha hosts the headquarters of the Taliban and Qatar played a critical role in securing an accord between group leadership and Washington.⁶³ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lauded Qatari involvement, calling the nation “an enormously important partner to get us to this very moment.”⁶⁴ Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller once again solicited help from Qatar to sway al-Shabaab leadership.⁶⁵ The nation has also joined efforts against the Islamic State.⁶⁶ Top-level officials in the U.S. government have pushed for an end to the siege in Qatar, considering how important this partnership is to American interests.⁶⁷

U.S. Permissiveness of Saudi Actions

In line with the concept of moral hazard, Saudi Arabian conduct is likely to be more reckless if the kingdom perceives that it has the unchallenged support of the United States. By that principle, the rhetoric employed by American officials as well as the continuation of security and weapons agreements would cause Saudi Arabia to feel that its relationship with the United States is secure regardless of its hazardous conduct.

White House Response to the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi

Unsurprisingly, President Trump has been one of the most influential figures in the modern United States-Saudi Arabian relationship. The president's first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia, and it concluded with the signing of a military arms deal worth hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade.⁶⁸ This initial tone has continued to influence the president's relationship with the kingdom, even in the face of grave concerns about Saudi actions. One of the biggest challenges came in the form of the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was brutally murdered inside the Saudi Arabian embassy in Istanbul.⁶⁹ Since the assassination, international parties have decried Saudi investigations as incredibly flawed, with UN Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard going so far as to call the kingdom's trial of Khashoggi's killers as "the antithesis of justice."⁷⁰ Many prominent authorities have come to accept that the Saudi state played a major role in Khashoggi's death, and that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was personally liable.⁷¹

Faced with a CIA assessment that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the assassination of Khashoggi, the president took a distanced tone. He commented in an official White House statement, "we may never know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."⁷² Despite questioning from the press about the crown prince's involvement in Khashoggi's murder, President Trump remaining trusting of the explanations coming from Saudi Arabia. Upon one

journalist asking the president whether he believed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was involved in the assassination, President Trump replied, "He says he didn't do it."⁷³ Trump also vetoed several congressional measures intended to block weapons sales to Saudi Arabia just one month after a UN report implicated the Saudi government in the murder.⁷⁴

Senior officials in the Trump Administration have joined the president in maintaining a skeptical tone about Saudi Arabian involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Secretary of Defense James Mattis saw no "smoking gun."⁷⁵ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took a similarly cautious approach, stating that there was no "direct reporting" of the crown prince's liability.⁷⁶ In a June 2019 meeting with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Secretary of State Pompeo made no mention of Khashoggi's death.⁷⁷ Instead, the agenda centered on regional tensions and maritime security in the strait of Hormuz.⁷⁸

As a whole, the United States government's response to the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi involved very few tangible challenges to Saudi Arabia. The Trump Administration rebuked a request from the Senate to investigate Khashoggi's death, specifically with regard to who ordered and orchestrated the assassination.⁷⁹ Ultimately, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on seventeen Saudi individuals who were implicated in Khashoggi's death, including Saud al-Qahtani, a former advisor to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.⁸⁰ The crown prince was not among the sanctioned individuals.⁸¹ Since the Senate's investigation request stipulated that an individual or individuals should be named responsible—and since Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statements of these sanctions did not include mention of a specific instigator—the measures were met with scrutiny.

White House Response to the Blockade of Qatar

Saudi Arabia's blockade of Qatar took place just weeks after President Trump visited Saudi Arabia on his first official trip in office. It was during this meeting, the president claimed, that he had encouraged Saudi Arabia and its partners to take meaningful action against Qatar for its financing of radical groups.⁸² Among other statements from President

Trump, which a senior administration official said were not the result of any policy deliberation, was a tweet that read as follows: “During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar - look!”⁸³ He went on to say, “So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!”⁸⁴

In a phone call with King Salman of Saudi Arabia soon thereafter, President Trump attempted to smooth over these tensions by emphasizing the importance of gulf nation unity in “defeating terrorism and promoting regional stability.”⁸⁵ But since this initial controversy, the rift between the United States and Qatar has only grown. Qatar has long hosted an American armed forces presence, and officials from the United States military expressed dismay over the president’s support for Saudi actions.⁸⁶ Saudi Arabia’s interests have remained dominant, as evidenced by the air ban on Qatar entering its third year, and Qatar has drifted significantly from the U.S. sphere of influence, developing closer ties with Iran in the aftermath of the blockade.⁸⁷

Fear of Iranian Influence

When it comes to United States calculus of Middle Eastern affairs, Iran has long cast an ominous shadow—and given Iran’s rivalry with Saudi Arabia, the interests of both nations are often contradictory. Indeed, the justifications for the United States maintaining ties with Saudi Arabia are very often contingent upon maintaining enmity with Iran. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, when asked about U.S. involvement in the Yemeni Civil War, stated, “If you truly care about Yemeni lives, you’d support the Saudi-led effort to prevent Yemen from turning into a puppet state of the corrupt, brutish Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁸⁸

The United States remaining in league with Saudi Arabia is in no small part a fixture of its persistent opposition to Iran. Saudi Arabian officials have been fully aware of this dynamic for years. In conversations with Obama administration advisers, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir warned of a Cold War-style domino effect in the region should Iran gain

more influence.⁸⁹ He cited the fact that Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria were already in league with Iran.⁹⁰ Over the course of his time in office, President Trump has relied on the very same rhetoric in his conduct with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Despite evergreen skepticism and distrust toward Iran, a United States policy based solely in those emotions might be misinformed. A number of scholars have questioned how involved in Yemeni affairs Iran truly is, with figures like Shlomo Brom and Yoel Guzansky arguing that the nation has overextended itself by being active in so many other conflicts in so many other countries.⁹¹ Further, Iran’s financial commitment to the Yemeni Civil War is measly compared to that of Saudi Arabia, which spends roughly \$50 billion per year on the conflict.⁹²



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on January 14, 2019.

Arms Deals

The arms deals Trump has signed with Saudi Arabia have come with massive price tags. They have also implicated American workers. When journalists and television hosts quizzed the president on whether he would condemn Saudi Arabia for its involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, his answer was a “no” rooted in concerns about losing American jobs: “I’d rather keep the million jobs, and I’d find another solution,” he shared at a roundtable.⁹³ Though the number is an exaggeration, the president has often returned to the justification. Companies like Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon all have stakes in a continued partnership between the two nations.⁹⁴

Beyond the obvious losses that would result from scrapping arms deals with the Saudi Arabian government, individuals across Saudi Arabia are lucrative players in the United States economy. Silicon Valley is saturated with Saudi investment. Between 2013 and 2018, Quid estimated that wealthy Saudis had pumped an estimated \$6.2 billion into these ventures.⁹⁵ Notably, Private equity firms and hedge funds stop in Riyadh on “road shows” to encourage greater financial ties.⁹⁶ The kingdom also hosted an investment conference in 2018 that came to be known as “Davos in the desert” and attracted executives and investors from across the world.⁹⁷ Officials from American companies like McKinsey & Co., Baker Hughes, and PepsiCo were all in attendance.⁹⁸

Ending Moral Hazard

The moral hazard issue that exists in United States-Saudi Arabian relations is due to the U.S. permissiveness of Saudi Arabian the resulting Saudi tendency to act recklessly. As a result, policy recommendations will need to tackle the United States’ reactions to Saudi actions in order to be effective. If Saudi Arabian officials perceive that it is likely that the United States may reduce its support for Saudi military and security goals, or if they perceive that the United States is cozying up to regional rivals, then the kingdom will need to reconsider its more morally reprehensible conduct. Implemented effectively, the following policy recommendations could encourage Saudi Arabia to reform—or at the very least, reassess—its actions.

Minimizing or Scrapping Arms Deals

In order to mitigate the continued devastation that Saudi Arabian military involvement has caused in Yemen, the United States should consider halting or minimizing its arms deals with the kingdom. Over the course of its involvement in the Yemeni Civil War, Saudi Arabia has used American weapons with indiscretion. American-made arms have been implicated in many strikes on civilian targets, and despite international exposes and scathing media coverage, this weapons-based relationship has persisted. Further, Saudi Arabian forces have exchanged American-made weapons with extremists and rival militant groups on the ground in Yemen, flaunting the agreements

that govern weapons sales between the two nations.⁹⁹ Given this continued indiscretion in conflict and this documented violation of American trust, the United States would be justified in suspending sales. These grounds, along with additional Saudi human rights violations, suppression of political dissidents, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi have all been cited in congressional efforts to suspend such deals. In May 2019, President Trump issued an emergency declaration in order to process an \$8.1 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia and other nations in the kingdom’s coalition without the need for congressional approval.¹⁰⁰ Though President Trump justified the move as necessary to resist Iranian aggression in Yemen, bipartisan resistance in Congress was strong.

Representative Ted Lieu (D-Calif.) introduced a measure to stop the deal, saying that the president’s justification was “not an emergency that would justify weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE that bypasses congressional procedure.”¹⁰¹ Both chambers seemed to agree. In June 2019, the Senate voted to block President Trump’s sale. Congressional efforts centered on three measures, all of which pertained to weapons sales with Saudi Arabia or Saudi allies. Seven Republicans joined the effort, including Senator Lindsey Graham and Senator Susan Collins.¹⁰² President Trump ultimately vetoed the bipartisan resolutions, claiming that they would “weaken America’s global competitiveness and damage the important relationship we share with our allies and partners.”¹⁰³ Despite strong congressional opposition to Trump’s justification, the Senate was unable to muster the votes necessary to override the president’s veto.

In November 2020, Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), along with four fellow Democratic three Republican congressmen, introduced a concurrent resolution calling for the removal of U.S. Armed Forces from Yemen.¹⁰⁴ The bill argues that U.S. support of the Saudi-led coalition—which consists of providing spare airplane parts, sharing combat-related intelligence, and training Saudi pilots—violates the 1973 War Powers Resolution.¹⁰⁵ With an incoming Biden administration, the legislation could be a first step in withdrawing the United States’s presence in the conflict. DeFazio’s resolution does not address weapons sales, but it could mark a new era of scrutiny toward Riyadh and open the door for arms-related bills.

All of that is to say that congressional efforts to limit the United States-Saudi Arabian relationship are not only feasible, but they have taken place in recent months and years. Indeed, this congressional opposition to current United States arms deals with Saudi Arabia is echoed by the general public. According to a YouGov survey conducted in 2018, 75 percent of Americans who had an opinion on the Yemeni Civil War disapproved of the role the United States has been playing since the onset of conflict.¹⁰⁶

Halting or minimizing arms deals would ultimately lead to reputational gains for the United States as well. The Saudi Arabian coalition has repeatedly been the subject of scathing remarks and condemnations from the United Nations. In 2015, UN Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein told the Security Council that “a disproportionate amount [of civilian suffering] appeared to be the result of air strikes carried out by coalition forces.”¹⁰⁷ Key figures in the European Union, the United Nations, and a host of other international organizations have decried the military action in Yemen, and many have specifically named the moral culpability of third state arms suppliers in the devastation.¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁹ By taking deliberate action to amend its role as an arms supplier in the Yemeni Civil War, the United States could prevent future denunciations and mend its reputation.

Improve Diplomatic Ties with Iran

Improving diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabian rivals—Iran in particular—could spark fears of abandonment in Riyadh. In order for Saudi Arabia to feel compelled to change its conduct, from a moral hazard perspective, the United States needs to impose consequences of some color. Bettering relations with the kingdom's most evergreen rival would make waves in Saudi Arabia.

Iran has long been a Saudi foe. These tensions became particularly exacerbated in the wake of the Arab Spring, when Saudi Arabia saw its status as a monarchy in the region to be in danger; Iran, meanwhile, feared losing its ally in Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹¹⁰ Saudi Arabia began to back Sunni opposition groups in Syria in the hopes of countering Iran's perceived role as a destabilizing force in the region.¹¹¹ Iran responded accordingly, involving its own forces in the Syrian Civil War.¹¹² Since then, almost

every major flashpoint in the Middle East has featured proxy conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including the Yemeni Civil War, political competition in Iraq, and Saudi-led efforts to quash protests in Bahrain.¹¹³ On top of these material considerations are the varying religious underpinnings and ideological differences in governance in the two nations. If the United States were to partner with Iran, for these reasons and more, Riyadh would perhaps be compelled to change course. However, improving diplomatic ties with Iran could very well put Saudi Arabia excessively on the defensive. Rather than pushing Saudi Arabia to fear being abandoned by the United States, the kingdom could see a transformed U.S.-Iranian relationship as an existential threat. Depending on how legitimate Saudi Arabia viewed that threat as, tensions could very well rise in the region.

This approach also runs the risk of causing a moral hazard problem in the relationship between the United States and Iran. After the United States and Iran signed the JCPOA, Iran's conduct had two tracks. On one hand, its nuclear program remained in line with U.S. interests. However, in terms of Iranian support for surrogate and proxy groups, little changed.¹¹⁴ Iran felt little U.S. resistance and remained regionally engaged.¹¹⁵ Just as the United States should pursue policies that lead to a greater degree of Saudi accountability, it should not formulate such policies at the expense of Iranian accountability. As such, diplomatic ties with Iran would require some sophisticated calculus in order to determine rules of engagement.

We can look to the recent history of the region to predict what future triangulation of United States, Saudi Arabian, and Iranian relations might look like. When the United States and Iran negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, concerns grew in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia never had a tangible fear of an Iranian nuclear threat, argued Bruce Riedel of Brookings; however, they were deeply concerned about Iran becoming a regional hegemon.¹¹⁶ The JCPOA legitimized Iran and brought the nation into an undesirable level of communication with the United States.¹¹⁷

When the United States elected to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018 under President Trump's lead, Saudi Arabia received the news happily. A Saudi Foreign Ministry statement read, “Iran used econom-

ic gains from the lifting of sanctions to continue its activities to destabilize the region, particularly by developing ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist groups in the region.”¹¹⁸ It went on to state that approaches geared solely to Iran’s nuclear program are insufficient, and instead must tackle all activities that Saudi Arabia perceives to be dangerous.¹¹⁹ Given the kingdom’s long standing rivalry with Iran, its insistence that the JCPOA was a “flawed agreement,” and its ongoing proxy wars with the nation, Saudi Arabia undoubtedly benefits from a negative relationship between the United States and Iran.¹²⁰

Conclusion

For years, senior government officials in the United States have proven unwilling to challenge Saudi Arabia and its questionable conduct, and as a result, the kingdom has felt no need to capitulate. Military campaigns and human rights violations in the Yemeni Civil War, Saudi officials being implicated in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and the blockade of Qatar have all gone relatively unchallenged among senior government officials in the U.S. In order for transgressions like these to cease, the U.S. will need to impose a meaningful cost on Saudi Arabia.

The policy recommendations above would have great humanitarian consequences for Yemen. If Saudi Arabia, compelled by fear of abandonment from the U.S., were to draw back its campaigns in Yemen, the course of the civil war would change completely. The United Arab Emirates completed a phased military withdrawal from Yemen in February 2020, which means that Saudi Arabia is by far the largest stakeholder left in the coalition’s efforts.¹²¹ Yemeni citizens stand to benefit from a changed U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship. After five years of bloody war, which has resulted in brutal cholera outbreaks, roughly 3.6 million displaced Yemenis, and nearly 20,000 civilian casualties, efforts to uncomplicate the web of actors involved in the conflict would surely be transformative.¹²²

Such changes to the U.S.-Saudi relationship would restore international respect as well. In addition to implementing more punitive foreign policy promises, Biden is intent on regaining the trust of

American allies and reestablishing the United States as a leader and role model internationally. After five years of support for the Saudi-led coalition’s military efforts—during which a number of devastating assaults on civilian targets have been publicized—the United States stands to regain respect from the various international figures and organizations who have decried the partnership.

Biden has made a number of comments that indicate he will pose tangible challenges to Saudi Arabia, and given the congressional and popular support those views have received, he will likely have the political capital necessary to accomplish such goals. Saudi Arabia, forced either to grapple with a U.S. government that is more critical of its conduct or is interested in normalizing ties with Iran, will have to weigh its present conduct against the risk of abandonment. For the United States, when it comes to relations with Saudi Arabia, it is time to leave behind the status quo created by the Trump administration.

Endnotes

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