

Facts and Fictions: A Defense of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

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Despite very different values and tactical preferences, Washington and Riyadh continue to share important strategic interests, and it would be the height of folly to throw them overboard because of misguided reactions to recent events.

When I first visited Saudi Arabia in early 1994, I was amused to see that its government was busily promoting a new national slogan, prominently displayed on banners and booklets across the land: "Saudi Arabia: Progress Without Change." The slogan rhymes in Arabic, sort of, but that didn't make the claim seem any less absurd.

Fifteen years later, a Harvard seminar offered an update from a top European executive at McKinsey, the same consulting firm currently planning Saudi Arabia's future development. In fluent but not perfectly idiomatic English, the executive described the blueprints for the kingdom's first (and still only) coeducational campus, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, which he said would actually have both men's and women's restrooms in the same building. And so, he intoned with unwitting humor, "ladies and gentlemen, you have only to look into the bathrooms to see which way Saudi society is headed!"

These two, all-too-true anecdotes show how slowly Saudi society is progressing, and how far it still has to go. But that alone cannot explain the ferocious media, academic, and private U.S. government reaction against the kingdom's recent execution of 47 men convicted of terrorist murder or other capital crimes, including one prominent Shiite sheikh. Admittedly, these executions were hardly a case of perfect justice; yet it is little worse than the constant rain of U.S. drone strikes against suspected terrorists all around the region. So, for a fuller yet ultimately false rationale for the current Saudi-bashing frenzy, one must look at five new factors.

First, the United States no longer needs Saudi oil for itself. This inevitably creates a climate more conducive to vocal

criticism of Saudi excesses. But it is important not to forget that we still need Saudi Arabia's irreplaceable ten million barrels per day of oil for a stable world economy -- and for our own "pivot to Asia," which depends critically on Saudi oil.

Moreover, Saudi petrodollars help finance several key U.S. partners in the region, from Egypt to Jordan to the Palestinian Authority. Iran's oil revenues, by contrast, underwrite our enemies: Assad, Hezbollah, Hamas, and others. Above and beyond the serious questions of credibility raised by any U.S. "distancing" from Saudi Arabia, these practical considerations alone make such a move a foolishly risky proposition.

Second, notwithstanding the above evidence, the U.S. attempt at rapprochement with Iran somehow makes rival Saudi Arabia seem to pale by comparison. Forgotten in this comparison is that Iran's rate of executions over the past year, on a (literally) per capita basis, is fully three times that of Saudi Arabia. Or that Iran, not Saudi Arabia, continues to be identified in all official U.S. accounts as the leading international state sponsor of terrorism -- including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the murderous Shiite militias in Iraq, and violent, subversive sectarian cells in every one of Iran's other neighbors. Even the Islamic State (IS), according to the U.S. government, bases its top money launderers in Iran.

Meanwhile, just as Iran has long been, and remains, a consistent adversary before and since the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia has long been a partner for U.S. diplomatic, economic, and security ventures. And most recently, it is Iran that has backtracked from an overt confrontation with Saudi Arabia, while some additional Arab governments are joining Riyadh's diplomatic campaign against Tehran.

Third, recent accusations of Saudi support for jihadi terrorism, plus the memory of 9/11, produce a reflexive tendency to blame "Wahhabism" and the extensive Saudi *dawa* (missionary) activities for all associated ills -- from al-Qaeda to IS. The fact is, however, that some of Saudi Arabia's support for foreign Islamists was in explicit partnership with the United States. This has ranged from funding and arming the Afghan mujahedin in the 1980s until their terrorist offshoots turned against us, to supporting the less-extreme Syrian Islamist opposition over the past five years.

And the Saudi government is not the entity funding or otherwise aiding IS, al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Taliban, or the other worst groups on the jihadi scene. On the contrary, the Saudis actively and even forcibly oppose those groups at home and now contribute to the fight against them beyond their borders. To be sure, official Saudi Islam remains largely fundamentalist, misogynist, and intolerant. That should change -- but this behavior is a far cry from material support for terrorism.

Fourth, the myth has spread that the latest Saudi moves have somehow "stymied" promising U.S. diplomatic initiatives, from Syria to Yemen. This is nonsense, since in regards to Syria, it is Iran, not Saudi Arabia, that stands in the way by calling Assad's removal from power a "redline" and assisting his butchery of Syria's civilian population. Furthermore, Riyadh has just announced that despite its rupture of diplomatic ties with Iran, it remains committed to the Syrian peace negotiations. Regarding Yemen, again, it was not the Saudis but their Houthi enemies who, with Iran's apparent blessing, first broke the recent ceasefire and first broke off talks about national reconciliation. And this move was probably motivated by the knowledge that at the moment, the Saudi side has gained the upper hand.

Fifth and finally, some critics now accuse the Saudi rulers of being their own worst enemies. The government is criticized for adventuring abroad and alienating their subjects at home, instead of focusing on what President Obama referred to as their "greatest threat": the unmet needs of their own growing population. This, critics say, is destabilizing Saudi Arabia -- another reason why the country is longer a reliable friend of the United States. But this charge can be leveled with greater accuracy against Iran, whose government sends thousands of troops and agents to fight abroad amid its own deep domestic repression, ethnic and sectarian discrimination, corruption,

unemployment, drug trafficking and addiction, and widespread poverty.

Besides, if I had a million dollars for every learned prediction, ever since the Nasserist revolutions and the Saudi palace coup in 1958, about the kingdom's imminent demise, I'd be almost as rich as it is. Some of the same critics who have lamented Riyadh's "geriatric" elite now cast aspersions on its "immature" and "untested" younger ruling princes. The combination of both criticisms does not make for a very convincing argument. And if the House of Saud ever does fall, what would replace it? A friendly democracy is almost certainly not in the cards, and much more likely an IS, al-Qaeda, or Iranian puppet regime would develop -- or some chaotic, hostile, and highly dangerous combination of all three.

The Saudis can and do have both internal problems and external threats; they need to deal with both. They are painfully yet effectively adjusting to much lower oil prices, as they have several times in the recent past. Their new foreign expeditions, starting with Bahrain in 2011, are in large part a reaction to a new U.S. reluctance to protect them -- these have performed reasonably well. And on the home front, both polling and solid anecdotal evidence clearly demonstrate that their citizens overwhelmingly support a very tough line against what they see as all three extremist threats: IS, al-Qaeda, and Iran.

All these factors add up: despite very different values and tactical preferences, the United States and Saudi Arabia have important and enduring common strategic interests. It would be the height of folly to throw those overboard because of misguided reactions to recent events, be they the execution incident or our own faltering outreach to Iran.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. This article was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8482#.VqQ5e_krLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8482#.VqQ5e_krLIU). ❖

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