

Useful Leverage, in the Right Circumstances

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Saudi Arabia has been one of the most important allies of the United States. But it has also staunchly supported opposition to reform and democracy in the Gulf, and now may offer aid to the Egyptian military that could dwarf what America provides. Should the United States continue to view Saudi Arabia as a stabilizing force in the region, or is it a dangerous ally whose policies will lead to more bloodshed and repression? In the latest installment of "Room for Debate," the New York Times asked several experts to answer this question. The following is Washington Institute counselor Dennis Ross's submission; [read the full debate on the Times website \(http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/21/the-threat-and-value-of-saudi-arabia\)](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/21/the-threat-and-value-of-saudi-arabia).

Good statecraft depends not just on using our own means to pursue our objectives, but also the means of those with greater leverage than our own.

Our direct leverage over Egypt is limited, but the Saudis are the one actor the Egyptian military cannot ignore. King Abdullah and Foreign Minister Saud have made it clear that they will put their nation's money and their legitimacy in the Sunni world on the line to support the Egyptian military because Egypt's stability is a vital interest of Saudi Arabia.

It is not hard to explain why. For the Saudis, there are two strategic threats in the region: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudis back certain opposition forces in Syria to weaken Iran and they support the Egyptian military to undermine the Brotherhood. We will not persuade the Saudis by arguing that the military is overplaying its hand.

If we want to move the Saudis on Egypt, we must address their strategic concerns; meaning, for example, that we must convince them that we are prepared either to change the balance of power in Syria or that we will, in fact, prevent the Iranians from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.

But we need them to help persuade the Egyptian military to be smart -- to make stability more likely by containing and not violently suppressing the Brotherhood and its demonstrations; to empower the interim government to focus on the economy and governance, not on control; to demonstrate their commitment to a political transition by creating an inclusive process for reviewing the new constitution; and by showing they want a genuine political transition and will support the development of civil society by pardoning those nongovernmental organizations

whose only crime was to try to educate people on how to build political parties with real platforms and agendas.

This will not be an easy sell. The Saudis won't be easily persuaded that we will address their concerns on Syria or Iran. But if we want to move them to push the Egyptian military toward a more hopeful path -- one that reflects both our interests and our values -- nothing less is likely to work. ❖

New York Times

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