

Saudi Arabia and the Case for Rebalancing U.S. Foreign Policy

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The United States needs a new doctrine for the Middle East. This new strategy should acknowledge that some allies in the Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia, no longer act as forces of stability. The U.S. administration must demand demonstrable changes in state-sanctioned religious indoctrination if it hopes to mitigate the increasing threats of international terror.

Wars in Iraq and Syria, more frequent attacks in Europe, and expanding Islamic militancy in Africa point to gaping U.S. policy deficiencies in its prevalent understanding of and vision for combating violent extremism in Muslim communities. Every time militants strike a Western city or establish a stronghold elsewhere, U.S. and Western allies rush to double down on airstrikes and issue calls for political settlements to civil wars. Yet these governments never confront their own allies in the Muslim world that have been helping to stoke the jihadi fires among Muslim communities. Instead, the most cost-effective answer to long-term terrorist threats is to stop Saudi Arabia's policy of promoting Salafi Takfiri Islam.

Governments in officially Muslim countries have long used religion to defend their legitimacy, distract from social and economic problems, and deflect anger to cultural "others" — Crusaders, Jews, or any other "infidels" at hand, including Muslims of the other sects. Saudi Arabia serves as the archetype of this dynamic in the modern age due to its founding alliance between ruler and cleric. In many authoritarian Sunni states, such as the UAE, preachers are state employees who receive weekly guidance on the topics and content of religious sermons. Governments can control preachers' access to airtime and who is allowed to preach at the country's largest mosque. These governments consequently have a tight control over their religious institutions; if so inclined, they can use these same channels to alter their message.

The union between the House of Saud and Wahhabism presents a different challenge altogether. The same call to jihad that was spread and financed by the Saudis to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan is used today by preachers and recruiters to call for joining the Syrian rebels against the Assad regime. But ISIS and Al-Qaeda franchises employ the same message, and they do so not only against Assad, the Iraqi government, Iran and Russia, but also against ordinary Syrians, Iraqis, or any other community that stands in their way.

Saudi Arabia cannot control the trajectory of its jihadi ideology unless it stops preaching it altogether. Once one says it is a duty to "fight the apostates" or "defend Islam" in one country, this enables others to begin waging offensive jihad in New York, Paris, Moscow, or even Mecca. The Saudi government has no mechanism to stop this reinterpretation of their message.

In the twentieth century, threats of communism and nationalist dictators numbed U.S. sensitivities to Riyadh's support of radical ideologies, since this brand of religion formed a barrier against these other, more threatening powers. But now, these earlier threats are gone, replaced by the threat of religious extremists. Nonetheless, U.S. policy has not adjusted.

When radical Sunni Islam made its debut as a major threat in 1998 through the al-Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies, the U.S. response tried to categorize the threat as individuals and non-state groups exclusively. The administration avoided pointing fingers at Saudi Arabia or acknowledging previous U.S. policies to support jihadi forces against the Soviets, working off of the prevalent belief that hands were tied. And although fifteen of the nineteen attackers on September 11 were Saudis, there continues to be a desire to avoid questioning Saudi policies, supposedly to avoid disrupting the oil markets or prevent weakening the Gulf states vis-à-vis Iraq and Iran. Yet the strategic environment has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Iraq can barely hold its own in the fight against ISIS within its own borders. Iran cannot realistically mount a serious conventional threat to its neighbors, who are armed to the teeth with technologically advanced weapons supplied by the West. The global energy landscape has also changed. We no longer live in a world held hostage to sudden energy shortages and adventurous oil embargoes.

But these outdated considerations have allowed the real engines behind the spread of jihadi ideology to go unchallenged.

It is possible to shape the behavior of governments that pay preachers to manipulate social and religious narratives. It is crucial to tame state-sanctioned propaganda machines like that of Wahabism—the 270 year old

puritanical cult that helped Ibn Saud build a state but has since spiraled out of hand.

The world is not blind to the hate and fundamentalism Saudi Arabia is teaching its children or, along with other Gulf States, spreading elsewhere. The narratives Saudi Arabia propagate to maintain domestic stability and further its state interests are causing the Middle East to unravel, and have helped to create ready recruits for ISIS, or the next menace, to exploit in every Muslim community.

Meanwhile, the Gulf States continue to take U.S. support for granted, and some may argue that this is understandable. After all, few would volunteer to disturb an alliance that dates back to Roosevelt, provides the U.S. military with access to strategically located bases in the Persian Gulf, and benefits the U.S. economy through its enormous weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.

These benefits have shaped the attitude in Washington that America needs its Gulf allies, which is true. Washington needs to understand that those allies need the United States more. For the United States to lose the Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain is a logistical inconvenience. For the Gulf states, the withdrawal of that fleet would be a strategic national security setback, to put it mildly. And the Gulf would become unable to maintain its Patriot batteries or F-16 and F-15 jets without US parts, munitions, or technical support. Having those battle tested systems turn into expensive paperweights, requiring the purchase of Russian or Chinese replacements, would involve costs and defense gaps that Saudi Arabia or the UAE cannot afford, especially in this period of proxy wars and heightened tensions.

The United States should rebalance its foreign policy in the Middle East by applying a merit-based system for relations with the Gulf States, starting with Saudi Arabia, just as Washington has entered a new phase of relations with Iran through the nuclear deal. Riyadh and Tehran have legitimate interests, but both employ reprehensible and dangerous policies. Nuclear weapons will not be permitted. The financing the radicalization of millions of Muslims to use in proxy wars should not be tolerated either.

The United States has enough leverage, and now is the time to use it.

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