

POLICY BRIEF:

RECALIBRATING U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS



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MUTUAL BENEFIT: RECALIBRATING U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS

President Biden's call for a full review of U.S.-Saudi relations is the single most consequential act by the U.S. Government regarding this core alliance in the past thirty years. The timing is significant, and many Congressional Republicans as well as Democrats are ready to re-evaluate U.S. interests and recalibrate the terms on which Washington engages Riyadh.

There can be no reasonable doubt as to the guilt of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in the brutal murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, nor can this travesty be swept under the rug. While this crime helps focus public attention, the pitfalls and challenges in the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship run much deeper and cover a much wider range of issues.

Addressing Saudi shortcomings piecemeal is a recipe for perpetuating the greatest weaknesses and liabilities in that system, to the detriment of U.S. interests in the Kingdom and across the region. It is important to recognize that effectively there is no rule of law in Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince has uncontested authority over the judicial system, as evidenced by his calculated release of dissidents – including U.S. citizens – whose only crime was exercising their fundamental freedom of expression. Mass executing protesters, detaining foreign leaders or imprisoning Saudi billionaires and political rivals without due process or accountability are not the hallmark of genuine reforms.

Saudi Arabia has long been devoid of almost any freedom – political, economic, or religious – and this has always been the Achilles heel in what needs to be a strong and stable bilateral relationship. Under the de facto rule of MBS, these injustices have grown even more severe. Where there used to be multiple gateways for American diplomats, investors and CEOs, there is now only one point of contact and power center in Saudi Arabia, which is to the detriment of both countries.

It would be unrealistic to expect Saudi Arabia to become a pluralistic, representative democracy in the near future. But beyond the importance of pushing for optimal confluence with universal values, the United States has a strategic interest as well.

Systemic change requires a significant amount of political will in both countries, and the monarchy will claim that reform threatens rather than enhances the regime's stability. But once unleashed, extremism and intolerance have proven to be unwieldy forces that eventually devour

those in power. If Saudi Arabia continues along its current path, these forces will doom the long-term sustainability of the Kingdom and of the U.S.-Saudi partnership.

After energy reserves and regional stability, Saudi Arabia's value to the U.S. national interest is as a bulwark against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Until 1979, Washington generally supported the Shah's brutal rule, leaving little room for dissent except for a total revolution. Replicating this approach with Saudi Arabia, especially given the prospect of a capricious and vindictive reign by MBS, runs several risks:

- An unstable and unreliable ally with its own agenda in Syria, Yemen, Iran
- Unpredictable and predatory state control impacting U.S. investors and businesses
- Continued arbitrary arrests, disappearances and show trials including U.S. citizens
- Ever deeper parallels between a U.S. ally (Saudi Arabia) and a U.S. adversary (Iran)
- An Iran-like revolution spawned by the Kingdom's own radical indoctrination, restrictive social codes, and state funding

If this final contingency is ever realized, then the very strategy of blocking Iran by bolstering the Saudis will have led to a *new* rogue state twelve miles from Israel and 140 miles from away the Mediterranean – and with one of the most sophisticated military arsenals in the world. Looking back on the past five years of mayhem, it's also worth considering the extent to which Saudi Arabia has already proven itself a rogue state.

MBS has established a dictatorship within the family of dictators, putting the Kingdom's survival at its greatest risk in decades. With the likelihood that he will soon become King and then rule indefinitely, it's more important than ever to set some clear ground rules for the U.S. approach and expectations for Saudi behavior.

Biden administration: In its first 100 days, the Biden administration has already departed significantly from its predecessor's policy of apathy and appeasement. Among the steps it has taken to date:

- Releasing the U.S. intelligence report implicating MBS in Khashoggi's murder and sanctioning 76 other Saudis who were involved
- Halting U.S. support for offensive operations in Yemen and appointing a special envoy on Yemen
- Reviewing major arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates previously approved under President Trump
- Announcing that President Biden will deal directly with King Salman rather than the Crown Prince

These steps and the continuing review of U.S.-Saudi relations fit into the Biden administration's broader reassessment of America's global interests, commitments, and strategies – not only a break from the Trump years but also an overdue course correction. The final outlines are appropriately a work in progress, but even the last four years have seen important Congressional debates and emerging bipartisan consensus on the parameters for U.S.-Saudi relations going forward.

Congress: Even if the Biden administration proves to be a trailblazer in reframing this bilateral dynamic, Congress will remain home to critical thought leaders and pressure points. The Executive Branch will always be more limited in its options than what legislators may be free to demand, but – whether on specific cases like Khashoggi or with regard to broader strategic directions – Congress's oversight and accountability powers are indispensable to achieving U.S. national interests. The White House, State Department and other Executive agencies contain multiple and competing viewpoints, and Members of Congress can help pick the winners.

To ensure that a more rational and values-based relationship with Saudi Arabia emerges and also becomes institutionalized across administrations for decades to come, Congress must be an active participant in the deliberations. This should extend to public hearings with Administration officials as well as with outside experts and activists. The process of forging a new U.S. approach should project the same transparency and inclusiveness that we advocate for Saudi Arabia.

Realistically, what overall policy guidelines and specific measures can help reestablish normative cooperation and trust between Washington and Riyadh, and maintain the kind of stability and progress that should be the hallmarks of Saudi legitimacy?

Bilateral Commission

A substantive U.S.-Saudi bilateral commission can produce clear and public timetables and benchmarks to address issues on both sides. The commission can include working groups with diverse representation from the business, academic and civil society sectors in both countries. The agenda can also cover a broad range of less confrontational issues, from technical cooperation and economic development to environmental stewardship and building more inclusive societies.

As a first step, reopening the limited space for civil society and public discussion which existed pre-MBS, along with enforceable agreements on judicial reforms, financial transparency and protection for foreign business ventures, will go a long way to reassuring American investors. Perhaps more importantly, those threatening a hostile takeover from within or outside the Kingdom will find fewer weaknesses to exploit.

Ideally, to avoid this commission becoming another superficial exercise, it would include influential Americans and Saudis who do not take direction from their respective governments. While the Saudi side is unlikely to follow suit, the U.S. delegations should reflect the diversity of American society and of our approach to the Middle East. Transparency and inclusiveness begin at home.

Special Envoy

Given the political sensitivities and cross-sector challenges facing the bilateral relationship, and the already heavy burdens on the U.S. Ambassador and staff in Riyadh, a U.S. Special Envoy will be in the best position to facilitate and negotiate what needs to be a “whole of government” approach in and between both countries. Based in Washington but with an office in Riyadh, this individual will be able to work with stakeholders on the long-term goals that are normally overshadowed by the immediate demands facing an Embassy.

Take Washington's hand off the political scale

The clear U.S. interest in maintaining Saudi Arabia as an ally should not be mistaken as an imperative to prop up the ruling family at all costs. Washington has no further appetite for “regime change” in the Middle East. But there’s no benefit to abiding – and worse, enabling – the exclusion and silencing of other voices within the Kingdom.

Washington should not dictate a country’s form of government. But the U.S. Government needs to reinforce the dictum that American resources, personnel, products and prestige cannot be used to repress political dissent or religious pluralism, or to consolidate power and undemocratic decisions. In no way does it advance U.S. interests or values for Saudi dissidents and their children to be held in handcuffs stamped “Made in USA”. Though it’s popular to claim the United States has to stay competitive with China, Russia or Iran, it is also a fact that – owing to America’s long-running profession of values and Washington’s track record of intervention – public opinion in the region expects more from the United States.

Proactive civil society agenda

As a guarantor of Saudi security, the United States should always be responding to human rights violations and other breaches of international norms. But to be more than an enabler and ‘fixer’ for the ruling family, Washington must also be more proactive in promoting a better and more resilient future for the Kingdom and its population of 35 million. Reactive tools like sanctions and punitive measures can be effective if targeted and messaged properly, yet they are no replacement for sustained support of civil society programs – an especially important vehicle since most homegrown initiatives are impeded and shut down.

In addition to funding through existing programs in the State Department and related agencies and grantees, a new dedicated fund can best highlight this priority. Ideally, other international partners and even Saudi sources would also contribute to the budget.

Statements and events by the U.S. Government, including the Embassy in Riyadh, should routinely reference internationally guaranteed rights for women, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, labor protections, and freedom of political and academic expression.

People-to-people

People-to-people exchanges are usually promoted by governments seeking to strengthen ties with the United States, and the relative lack of such programs in Saudi Arabia isolates and alienates its own people while also keeping Americans from developing an affinity. Many Saudis visit, study and live in the West, but most Saudis will never engage extensively with Westerners or non-Muslims. And very few Americans ever get to see Saudis on their home turf. There is no shortage of potential opportunities, and U.S. and Saudi initiatives should be encouraged and subsidized.

Religious pluralism

The future of Saudi Arabia will be far more secure, and the resort to violent extremism less attractive, if the ruling family allows legal practice of other streams of Islam and non-Islamic faiths. The bonds between Americans and Saudis will also deepen if Arabia's tradition of respect for Christians and Jews is rekindled, including permission for expatriate Christians to worship publicly as they did well into the last century. Additionally, American delegations should be meeting with the Mufti and with other religious leaders, not only with the governmental and external affairs officials who may also have religious titles – and these meetings and joint events should be carried on state media channels, so Saudis see that it's again acceptable.

Reciprocity

While Washington cannot force Saudi Arabia to become more democratic, we can at least insist on the same access and courtesy accorded to Saudis in the United States to be reciprocated by a friendly country that claims it is 'open for business'. U.S. Embassy officers and other Americans – including journalists – should be free to meet any Saudi without incurring anyone's arrest. If Saudi funds can subsidize mosques and schools in the United States, then non-Muslim expatriates should not be barred from holding prayer groups and establishing churches – even one or two – within the Kingdom. By themselves, such steps will not transform Saudi Arabia, but they can begin opening Saudi society to genuine and unfiltered American engagement and breaking down taboos that undermine the bilateral relationship.

New economic rationale

There is a compelling U.S. interest in reorienting the bilateral economic equation, and not just because demand for fossil fuels is on the verge of a long decline. Shifting the focus from oil concessions and military sales to planning and construction of the new schools, hospitals and urban infrastructure the Kingdom still sorely lacks will generate hundreds of billions of dollars for American companies and professionals, and it will prepare Saudi Arabia's people to fully compete in world markets. Such projects will also have a much closer impact on the daily lives of the Saudi population and their identification of America's brand.

Individual sanctions

Since there is no "regime change" goal, it's important that sanctions be specific, proportional, consistent, and targeted to specific outcomes and criteria – without hurting the general population. By removing many perks of being part of the ruler's inner circle, such measures reduce the value of supporting corrupt actors, impose new risks, and ideally generate pressure for more enlightened behavior.

Khashoggi Ban: In principle, the new "Khashoggi ban" can apply to any foreign official involved in the ongoing persecution of dissidents beyond a country's borders. While "naming and shaming" carries a natural appeal for those advocating accountability and transparency, even undisclosed visa bans and restrictions on meeting U.S. officials impose a severe penalty on members of the ruling elite whose privileges include meetings and conferences with Americans and the leisure to vacation, shop and send their children to university in the United States.

Magnitsky Act: The Magnitsky Act imposes a series of additional sanctions on individuals engaging in corrupt practices. With vocal support in Congress, a clear directive from the President and Secretary of State will finally empower the relevant U.S. officials to implement measures against the Saudis who enable and profit from corruption and the undermining of rule of law.

The European Union has its own sanctions protocols, including within Magnitsky parameters. To be most effective, the U.S. Government should routinely coordinate punitive measures with such

international partners, as well as with the global business community and civil society organizations.

Weapons sales

It's not unusual for the United States to impose restrictions on the use of U.S.-made weapons, technology and other products, including where they can be deployed and against whom. End-user agreements are routine, as are dual-use restrictions. Congressional oversight plays an important role in identifying potential risks and violations. Under no circumstances should American exports be enabling activities which undermine U.S. interests. If owning the latest American hardware and systems is the ultimate status symbol, then they should not be sold off at face value.

Extremism

U.S.-Saudi relations don't only influence stability in the Gulf or terror movements across the Middle East. Saudi-funded schools, mosques and texts around the world instill a narrative of Wahabi Islam under existential attack by Western influences. The blanket persecution of non-Wahhabi Muslims and other 'undesirables' affects millions of Saudis and foreign workers. The domestic pipeline of hate – in schools, in the military, in government media – indoctrinates young Saudis who are then at risk of actualizing this hatred and war mentality through acts of terror.

Recent modifications by the Saudi government include further omission of antisemitic and other inciteful passages from school textbooks; removal of inciteful articles from the official *Islamic Soldier* magazine, and deletion of archived radio sermons by a prominent espouser of antisemitism who has recently become the Kingdom's principal envoy to American Jewish organizations. Rather than reflecting any systemic reforms, and usually in response to repeated and public exposure, such incremental and isolated changes create a satisfying mirage of progress.



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