



BACKGROUND

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Uncomfortable Allies: Getting Tough Responsibly with Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia is a difficult country to talk about. There is much about the Saudi regime that makes Americans uncomfortable, even angry. Yet there are few countries as critical to America's security. Improving the dynamic of our awkward embrace with the Saudi regime requires balancing our interests and our values, and our indignation with a real strategy for change.

An Awkward Relationship

The deal that underpins Saudi-U.S. relations is strikingly simple: we provide security for the Saudi royal family, the Saudis help maintain regional security and keep the price of oil affordable. On the surface, the reasons for this marriage of convenience are clear. The United States is the world's preeminent power - and it's most prolific consumer of oil and gas. The Saudis are sitting on roughly 262 billion barrels of oil - nearly a quarter of the world's oil reserves - and have remarkable influence in setting global oil prices. Although we import more oil from Canada and Venezuela, we depend on the Saudis to feed the engine of the global economy, since oil prices are set globally.

Yet the deal has been rotting from within. With Saddam gone, Saudi Arabia now largely faces internal threats - threats that are heightened by their unpopular relationship with the United States. And with the rising costs of oil dependence and the threat of radical Islam, we are hardly served by our connection to a regime whose behavior has contributed to both.

On our side, the deal is morally bankrupt and harms our national security. Saudi Arabia is an autocracy. Power is

wholly concentrated in the royal family. Political parties are banned. Public executions and amputations mark a brutal justice system. Women have severely limited rights; they cannot even drive cars. At the same time, in part to appease a conservative religious establishment, private and public Saudi money in the billions of dollars

has been finding its way to radical Islamic jihadists: extremist wahabi madrasas across the world; dubious charities with ties to groups like Hamas; al Qaeda; and the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq. A climate of repression and religious extremism has made Saudi Arabia a fertile recruiting ground for terror. The world's most famous jihadist, Osama bin Laden, was raised in the Saudi culture. So were 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11.

Meanwhile, the Saudis don't like our heavy-handedness, support for Israel, and the war in Iraq, and are showing an independent streak. King Abdullah has brokered a deal between Palestinian

factions that left Hamas in a strong position, called for an end to the U.S.-led isolation of Hamas, and refused to forgive Iraqi debt. At an Arab League summit, he said, "In the beloved Iraq, the bloodshed is continuing under an illegal foreign occupation." An American state dinner for the King was quietly postponed - at his request. Like a marriage in which long-simmering tensions are coming to the fore, the cracks in the façade are growing. The status quo is no longer feasible.

The Problems with a Hard Line

It's tempting to take a hard line. On the right, some call for the U.S. to take a belligerent stance toward the

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Saudis, perhaps even seizing their oil fields. On the left, some demand that human rights become the centerpiece of our policy. There is also a dose of conspiracy theory. Michael Moore got a lot of mileage from showing planes full of Saudis leaving the U.S. after 9/11 (even though U.S. airspace was open, and the passengers were vetted by no less a Democratic hero than Richard Clarke). For many politicians on the stump - notably John Kerry in 2004 - the Saudis present a ripe target for tough applause lines.

Before launching attacks on the Saudis - real or verbal - consider the consequences. The current Saudi regime cooperates with us against al Qaeda, opposes Iran's rising influence, and has no nuclear ambitions; we would have no guarantee that its successor would see things the same. Rapid change could lead to catastrophic instability: if free and fair elections were held today, the likely victors would not be liberal reformers - they would be Islamists, more sympathetic to jihadists, and no more likely to liberalize Saudi society. And any major disruption in the availability of Saudi oil would cause oil prices to spike, harming our economy.

Moving Beyond the Status Quo: A Smarter Agenda

So long as Saudi Arabia continues to repress its people, there will always be a thin veneer of stability over a powder keg of anger that we dare not disturb. For our long-term security, we must reject the status quo. We should also refuse the Administration's short-sighted approach of pushing the Saudis to lead a bloc of Sunni states against Iran - a recipe for division that only further exacerbates sectarian conflict. Instead, we need to promote stable but steady change to help drain the Saudi powder keg and free our economy.

Sunshine: In the short term, we should shine a light on what we know about terrorist financing from Saudi Arabia. Too often, we sweep awkward information about the Saudis under the rug. Infamously, 28 pages of the Joint Congressional Inquiry into 9/11 widely believed to detail Saudi terror connections were redacted. Today, as we pillory Iran and Syria, we hear little about Saudi money finding its way to Sunni insurgents in Iraq. Unless it compromises intelligence gathering, we should be blunt when we know that money from Saudi individuals or charities is funding terror. The resulting outcry puts more pressure on the Saudi government to take action to cut off this lifeblood for extremism.

An Agenda of Reform: Just as we press the Saudis on counter-terrorism, we should make it clear to the Kingdom that our continued security support depends upon their undertaking the pragmatic economic and political reforms needed to dampen the resentment that

has helped drive many Saudis to terror. For the security of both Saudi Arabia and the United States, they need to lay the groundwork for meaningful political change over time: greater political participation, including women; more freedom for civil society and independent media; an end to brutal practices that offend human dignity; greater access to education, including religious education that is not controlled by radicals; and economic equality. We should shine a light on gross human rights violations so that we are not giving the regime the stick with which they beat their people; otherwise, Saudis will hold their regime's brutality against us. And we should deepen our ties and contacts in Saudi Arabia so that we are talking to a wider swath of society than simply the royal family.

Energy Security: Changing our energy policy is the best thing we can do to fundamentally change the balance of power in the Saudi-U.S. relationship. This won't happen overnight - it will take years to wean ourselves off of our addiction to oil and gas. But if we are bold in reducing our dependence on foreign oil and gas, we will be less beholden to the Saudi royal family, our economy will be less vulnerable to shocks from the Persian Gulf, and the spigot of petro-dollars that has flooded radical Islam can be slowly turned off. This could be good for Saudi society as well. An economy that is totally dependent on oil and gas should diversify, creating more opportunity - and more equal distribution of wealth - for the people of Saudi Arabia.

To win the fight against jihadist terror, America's goal must be a wholly different relationship in twenty years: one in which Saudi Arabia has liberalized its political system and society to give people non-violent modes to express themselves and seek opportunity, and in which we have freedom to maneuver because our economy is less anchored in Saudi sand. The goal must be a Saudi-U.S. relationship that our leaders can uphold with pride, not resignation.

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