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Tankers for Tomahawks: An Argument for Restraint with Saudi Arabia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia, or KSA) has long been a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the Middle East. As Riyadh is often seen as a balancer to Iran in the region, the U.S.-Saudi partnership has risen to prominence since the late 1970s and has remained so now. Central to this relationship is the extensive arms trade between the two nations, where the United States has consistently supplied advanced weaponry to Saudi Arabia. However, this partnership has not been without controversy, drawing scrutiny from policymakers, scholars, and the public alike. In the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration viewed the Saudi kingdom as one of strategic importance to achieving U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Specifically, the need for oil was a high priority for the American economy. In addition, the Soviet Union was seen as a grave military threat to access to the Persian Gulf and its resources.¹ Now more than ever, however, lawmakers, policy experts, and human rights activists have become dubious of the overall importance of this relationship.

As the United States has begun to push for civil liberties and human rights across the globe, relationships with authoritarian countries such as Saudi Arabia tarnish the genuineness of America's strategy.² Unlike in its relationships with other authoritarian countries, it has become difficult for the U.S. government to break from its relationship with the Saudis. U.S. militarism is a lead factor in this dilemma. The presence of American soldiers on Saudi soil itself has carried numerous consequences, particularly with the Arab world which has viewed the U.S. military presence in their holy land as another form of American imperialism.³

A second important consideration is the amount of weapons sent to Saudi Arabia and their impact (or lack thereof) on U.S. interests. For decades, the United States has pursued high-value arms deals with the Saudis

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in hopes of balancing the region in its favor and obtaining favorable deals over trade and oil in the Persian Gulf. However, when looking at the current U.S.-Saudi relationship, the partnership hasn't balanced in America's favor.

While it is necessary for the United States to thoroughly reexamine its overall foreign policy goals in the Middle East and North Africa, including its relationship with countries in North Africa, its unwavering backing of Israel, the failures of the Global War on Terror, and its inability to stop Iran's march toward obtaining a nuclear weapon, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has stood through decades of controversy. Saudi Arabia has continuously undermined U.S. interests in the Middle East while contributing further instability in the region while completely ignoring U.S. values of democracy and civil liberties. It is necessary more than ever for Washington to reexamine its relationship with Riyadh.

History of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

During World War II, the Persian Gulf region was viewed as vital to the Allied cause for supporting military operations in North Africa and maintaining access to oil. President Franklin Roosevelt met with Saudi King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud on Valentine's Day in 1945, where despite their many differences, the two leaders came to a great understanding of Saudi Arabia's necessity to the postwar world due to its oil.⁴ Following the meeting between Roosevelt and Ibn Saud, the Dhahran Air Base was established, solidifying U.S. security agreements with the Kingdom. At the time, the agreement was simple: Oil for security.⁵

Over time, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has become more complex. Following the end of the Second World War, the United States saw the Saudis as the key player in the Middle East and a bulwark against Soviet influence in the region. Agreements such as the 1951 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement marked a new moment for the relationship, as Washington was authorized to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia and train Saudi troops.⁶ Since then, Saudi Arabia has been a prime benefactor of U.S. arms sales.

Throughout the Cold War era, arms sales to Saudi Arabia

were driven by strategic considerations, including countering Soviet influence, maintaining access to oil resources, and supporting regional stability. Major arms deals, such as the sale of F-15 fighter jets in the 1970s and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) surveillance aircraft in the 1980s, underscored the depth of military cooperation between the two nations.

In the wake of the fall of the Shah in Iran and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and rebel groups' seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, President Jimmy Carter made it clear that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This would later be known as the Carter Doctrine.⁷ This would be followed by the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) amid fears the Soviets might invade, or control through a friendly Iran, resource-rich Khuzestan. Moreover, if the Soviets were successful in gaining access to these areas, they would be in a strategic position to threaten Saudi Arabia and oil access through the Persian Gulf.⁸ The RDJTF would later become United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and still plays a pivotal role shaping American strategy in the Middle East.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, maintaining the free flow of oil in the Persian Gulf remained a high priority for the United States. The Gulf War solidified the already growing military cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia, in addition to America's involvement in the Middle East. When Iraqi president Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States established a coalition of forces including Saudi Arabia to expel his forces from Kuwait. Part of this process involved deploying more than 500,000 troops to Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield.⁹ To this day, there are still troops in Saudi Arabia, the consequences of which will be explained in the later part of this paper.

In the 2000s, the U.S.-Saudi relationship grew despite tensions over the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the coming Global War on Terror, and the Arab Uprisings of the early 2010s.¹⁰ As Saudi Arabia led a coalition of forces in the Middle East during the civil war in Yemen, the United States aided the Saudis through military support

despite heavy backlash back home. As of 2024, there are talks of the United States making a permanent security guarantee to Saudi Arabia in exchange for the Kingdom’s normalization of relations with Israel.¹¹

Arms Sales and Militarism

Arms Sales

The historical trajectory of U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia is deeply intertwined with geopolitical shifts, strategic interests, and evolving regional dynamics in the Middle East. Understanding this history provides crucial insights into the motivations and consequences of this enduring alliance. This partnership has exceeded that of many other nations perceived to be of strategic importance to the U.S. including India, South Korea, and Australia. A particularly striking example is that in 1982, the Saudis successfully lobbied the Reagan Administration and Congress (with energy security of paramount importance) to sell them AWACS aircraft, which had just been developed.¹²

Over the course of the past decade, the United States has provided twice as much military aid to Saudi Arabia as it has to the second-largest recipient, Japan.¹³ Congress is given the ability to limit and block arms sales through legislation such as the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) the Foreign Assistance Act, and the “Leahy Laws,” which prohibit military support to countries where there is credible sources reporting that the country a “gross violation of human rights.”¹⁴ Despite these provisions and growing antipathy on Capitol Hill for these sales, Congress has yet to successfully block them.

Figure 1: Arms Sales Risk by Recipient

Country	Arms sales in millions of U.S. dollars (2009–2021)	Risk score 2021	Risk score 2020	Risk score 2019	Risk score 2018	Year-on-year risk score change
Saudi Arabia	26,889	73	72	74	75	1
Japan	12,840	18	16	17	13	2
Australia	10,956	26	23	22	30	3
United Arab Emirates	10,504	57	55	56	57	2
Iraq	10,445	75	74	74	84	1
Taiwan	9,489	14	13	13	14	1
Israel	8,949	43	46	47	39	-3
Egypt	8,517	73	72	71	71	1
United Kingdom	8,121	30	29	28	37	1
South Korea	7,917	20	18	19	20	2
Turkey	5,493	74	65	66	67	9
Canada	4,935	26	23	23	32	3
Kuwait	3,773	39	38	45	46	1
Pakistan	3,660	69	67	76	76	2
Singapore	2,977	32	27	26	27	5
Germany	2,779	27	26	25	26	1
India	2,677	57	56	55	54	1
Greece	2,459	33	30	30	31	3

Source: Cato Institute 2022 Arms Sales Risk Index

According to the Cato Institute’s annual Arms Sales Risk Index, Saudi Arabia receives more arms than any other country partnered with the United States.¹⁵ The index also rates Saudi Arabia one of the riskiest countries to sell weapons to - alongside Pakistan, Egypt, and Iraq.¹⁶ Given that the factors that comprise the index include state fragility, corruption, human rights violations, and being at war, it is clear that arms sales to Saudi Arabia pose a distinctly different challenge to U.S. interests than those to democratic allies like South Korea, Japan, and Ukraine that play a role in balancing their regions.

Yet Saudi Arabia has always been a prime benefactor of the U.S. defense industry. This relationship intensified during the 2010s, as between 2015 and 2021, it was estimated that Washington sold \$54.6 billion in military aid to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners.¹⁷

In 2021, President Biden announced that Washington would be halting the sales of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Although this sounds like a change in policy, it’s more gilded than true gold. Ultimately, Biden lifted the ban on offensive weapons, leaving open the possibility of defensive weapons sales. In December 2023, the State Department approved \$582 million in

military aid to Riyadh including maintenance for the Saudis RE-3A surveillance aircraft.¹⁹ Nevertheless, even strictly allowing only defensive weaponry is problematic. Defensive support still allows for the refueling of Saudi aircraft when conducting bombing operations, which have contributed to the bombing of civilian areas and decimate key humanitarian necessities in Yemen such as hospitals and ports.²⁰

Weapons dispersion is also an issue. In 2019, it was reported that Saudi Arabia and its coalition fighting in Yemen had transferred weapons to al-Qaeda-linked fighters.²¹ In addition, those weapons also made their way to Iranian-backed groups, which have ultimately exposed key American military technology to Tehran.²² By providing U.S. weapons to armed groups, Riyadh broke the terms of the arms agreement set by Washington. It was also reported that the Saudis and coalition allies have been using the weapons to buy loyalty from rebel groups in Yemen.²³ This begs the question of whether these transfers actually grant Washington leverage over Riyadh or if Riyadh is abusing the perception that they do at the expense of Washington.

Currently, the war in Yemen has deteriorated to the point that the Houthi militias control the majority of the western part of the country. It would seem, therefore, that American arms have not benefited the situation and only contributed to make things worse.

The U.S. Troop Presence: Necessary or Unnecessary?

The United States currently occupies ten military bases in Saudi Arabia, and while there are fewer American bases and troops in the country than in countries such as Germany, South Korea, and Japan, the presence of American soldiers in Saudi Arabia has angered many in the region.²⁴ While it was necessary to station troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, the choice to keep them in the country is more detrimental than beneficial.

One key example of this is the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the rise of al-Qaeda. In short, there is considerable evidence that highlight's Osama bin Laden's resentment towards the United States for keeping soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia. In his famous "Letter to the American People," bin Laden explicitly states "Your forces occupy our countries; you spread your military bases

throughout them; you corrupt our lands," especially Saudi Arabia.²⁵ He argued that Muslims had legitimate grievances and had the right to drive the United States from the Middle East.²⁶ This was ultimately a driving force for the attacks.

To be clear, seeking to understand bin Laden's critique of U.S. foreign policy is in now way condoning the barbaric attacks he and his forces committed. This is instead to underscore a common theme across the Muslim world: America is not welcome. Several of the holiest sites in Islam including Medina and Mecca are in Saudi Arabia. The presence of American soldiers has angered a vast majority of the Muslim world, who view America's presence as a form of Western imperialism, especially after the onset of the Global War on Terror.²⁷

The United States has made strides to limit its military footprint on the Arabian Peninsula and has withdrawn the vast majority of its soldiers from Saudi Arabia. Currently, there are just under 400 active duty soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia.²⁸ Despite the withdrawal of some troops, the majority of the Muslim world looks negatively upon America's presence in the Middle East. In addition, the shifts from the use of conventional forces to the use of drones, special operations, and providing substantial military support to partners to compensate for a limited American engagement certainly has not helped the United States bolster its image in the region.

As stated before, the 9/11 attacks were used to justify increased military support for Saudi Arabia, especially in the name of counterterrorism. In fact, fifteen of the nineteen hijackers who crashed two commercial airplanes into the Twin Towers, one into the Pentagon, and one in a Pennsylvania field were from Saudi Arabia.²⁹ bin Laden himself was also Saudi Arabian. Many Saudi government officials including the former Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan, diplomat Fahad al-Thumairy, and Saudi national Omar al-Bayoumi have all been accused of aiding the hijackers.³⁰ While Saudi Arabia emerged as a considerable partner in counterterrorism operations at the beginning of the Global War on Terror, it has since been less helpful and at certain times, acted in ways that were detrimental to American military efforts.³¹

Oil's Role

When President Roosevelt met with Ibn Saud aboard the U.S.S. Quincy in 1945, he recognized the importance of building a strong relationship with the Arab country as a means of having access to its oil reserves.³² Oil has played a large role in U.S. foreign policy for nearly a century now. It was a factor that led the United States to back the Shah in Iran, to support Hussein's Iraq over Iran after the Shah's government fell, and to intervene during the Gulf War to remove Hussein from Kuwait.³³

However, the policy of oil for security was a vital part of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, even as preventing the spread of communism became the foremost foreign policy of presidential administrations throughout the Cold War. Companies such as the Arabian-American Oil Company (later Saudi Aramco), Exxon Mobil, Chevron, and Dow Chemical amassed fortunes in Saudi Arabia.³⁴ These companies and many others would ultimately lead the Saudi Kingdom to becoming the world's largest exporter of oil.³⁵

For Riyadh's part, one of the ways it has used its leverage in the relationship has been with regard to U.S. policy with Israel. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Saudi Arabia pushed the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) to sanction the United States and other countries that supported the Israelis in the war.³⁶ Again in the 2000s, after the eruption of the Second Intifada in Palestine, the Saudi government threatened to "reevaluate" their relationship with the United States over America's military support for Israel.³⁷ Nevertheless, because Saudi Arabia relies so much on the exportation of oil, it depends heavily on revenues from large importers such as the United States. Furthermore, if the Saudis were to continuously use their leverage to punish the United States, it would only further encourage American investment for alternative energy solutions.

However, the U.S. doesn't have the leverage to influence Saudi Arabia from stopping or at least limiting exports to rival countries such as China. Indeed, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the Biden Administration asked the Saudis to increase oil output after Western countries imposed sanctions on Russian energy exports.³⁸ Instead, the Saudi government announced it would further cut production by a million barrels per day.³⁹ Ultimately, a relationship once built on the United States being the prime benefactor of Saudi oil

is no more despite Saudi Arabia being the number one importer of American weaponry.

In recent years, the United States has imported less and less oil from Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States was importing fewer than 1.6 million barrels of oil per day.⁴¹ Today, that number has been reduced by approximately two-thirds, as over the course of the past two decades, the United States has slowly become less and less reliant on Saudi energy. Now, China has become the primary business partner for Saudi oil companies, importing 23.8% of the market share.⁴² While the overall importation of oil from Saudi Arabia has dropped over 8% in the last five years, Saudi exports to China have grown over 200%.⁴³

In addition, there is a growing debate over whether it is still necessary for the U.S. to continue importing from Saudi Arabia. The United States has made great strides to become independent of global oil imports by expanding its markets of clean energy methods, which are not vulnerable to global price shocks.⁴⁴ On the export side, the United States has actually increased its exports of oil in recent years, breaking a record of over four million barrels per day this past year.⁴⁵ Although the majority of these exports have gone to Europe to supplement the absence of Russian oil, this shows how the United States has large enough oil reserves that it need not be dependent on Saudi oil.

Interestingly, the Saudis themselves have actually been working to lessen their dependence on oil. The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) wildly ambitious plan known as Vision 2030 seeks to restructure the country's primary source of revenue from oil exports.⁴⁶ Although there is growing uncertainty over the ultimate success of Vision 2030, it demonstrates that oil is no longer a significant enough factor to justify America's military support for the Saudi Kingdom.

The Impact of Human Rights

There are many arguments for why the United States should not be aligned with Saudi Arabia, but one of the strongest is based on the ideals of both countries. The United States is a democracy and has sought to promote democratic values abroad since the post-

World War II period. In contrast, Saudi Arabia is a monarchy that has engaged in crackdowns on its civilian population, murdered journalists such as Jamal Khashoggi of the Washington Post, and is alleged to have facilitated state-sponsored terrorism.⁴⁷

With all the problems that have come from this, the hypocrisy of America supplying authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia has been a constant that has done more harm than good in conducting diplomacy in the Middle East.⁴⁸ Ultimately, Washington has turned a blind eye to the policies of the Saudi government and this has hindered America's ability to use any leverage in the relationship. Furthermore, President Joe Biden's promise that human rights would be a linchpin of his foreign policy has come to be disingenuous and a continuation of policies conducted by previous presidents.⁴⁹

The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi occupied the front pages of newspapers around the world in 2018. Saudi officials claimed the murder of the Washington Post journalist who was critical of the Saudi government was the result of a "rogue operation."⁵⁰ However both U.S. and Turkish intelligence officials stated that the assassination was carried out with orders from the Saudi government, leading all the way to the Crown Prince.⁵¹ By 2021, the Saudi public prosecution stated that 31 individuals were being investigated for the murder, and 21 of them were arrested.⁵² Eleven of those individuals were put on trial with the Saudi government recommending the death penalty for five of them. However, Human Rights Watch stated that the trials lacked substance since they were held behind closed doors and "obstructed meaningful accountability."⁵³

The murder of Khashoggi is not an outlier. In March of 2022, Saudi Arabia executed 81 people, the largest mass execution in the country in decades. This came after Riyadh promised to limit its use of the death penalty.⁵⁴ The Saudi government has also been accused of mass arrests of human rights activists, intellectuals, and dissidents, even giving decades-long prison sentences for individuals who criticized the government on social media.⁵⁵ In addition, it was revealed in a 73-page report by Human Rights

Watch that Saudi Arabian border guards have killed hundreds of migrants from Ethiopia, many of whom were women and children.⁵⁶ Refugees claimed border guards used explosive devices and shot migrants at close-range. While the State Department raised concerns with the Saudi government over the report, killings of these migrants are still being reported.

Saudi Arabia's human rights violations in Yemen have attracted some of the harshest criticisms towards Riyadh. What was thought to be an intervention to expel a rebel group known as the Houthis from Yemen's capital has spiraled into one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Of the 33.7 million citizens in Yemen, it is estimated that 21.6 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 11 million children.⁵⁷ As the United States is the main arms supplier of Saudi Arabia and the coalition forces in Yemen, it is directly complicit in the catastrophe that has unfolded.

Weapons such as small diameter bombs, Patriot missiles, and F-15 jets are a mere subsection of the weapons that have been used by the Saudis. These weapons have been used in a wide array of atrocities including an airstrike on a detention center in Sa'adah, which killed at least 80 people and injured over 200, a bombing of a school bus that killed 40 boys aged six to eleven and injured 79 people, and the bombing of the Hudaydah Port (which killed three people), which was vital for sending humanitarian assistance to the Yemeni population.⁵⁸

These are just a small list of examples of the United States contributing to Saudi Arabia's war crimes in Yemen. This support, as well as the refueling of Saudi fighter jets to support bombing campaigns have made Yemen a humanitarian disaster and may have turned more people to supporting the Houthis rather than the Saudi-backed coalition.⁵⁹

Overall, the United States should be wary about working with MBS. Despite policies such as improving women's rights and transitioning Saudi Arabia from Wahhabism (a hardline practice of Islam), his government has defied American interests through means such as the murder of Khashoggi, drawing closer to Russia and China, and leading the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Policy Analysis: What Can Be Done?

It is past time for the United States to reevaluate its relationship with Saudi Arabia. While originally a beneficial partner in stabilizing the Middle East and preserving access to oil, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has continuously undermined U.S. interests in the Middle East while benefiting from American security guarantees. On the campaign trail in 2019, President Biden proclaimed that the United States would stop “coddling dictators at the expense of American national security interests.”⁶⁰ While President Biden has made small steps to change the trajectory of the U.S. relationship with the Saudi Kingdom, there remains more to be done.

Reject Security Guarantees

Lately however, U.S. policymakers have been pushing for an agreement with Saudi Arabia that involves security and trade guarantees in exchange for diplomatic relations with Israel.⁶¹ This would also involve the United States assisting Riyadh in developing its own civilian nuclear program.⁶² As the 2024 campaign cycle beckons, President Biden is eager to cement a landmark agreement that he hopes will create peace in the Middle East.

Ultimately this agreement would not serve America’s strategic interest. Furthermore, the United States would be conceding a great deal in exchange for an agreement that truly has only surface level ramifications.

Instead, this agreement would entrap the U.S. military in an already unstable region while guaranteeing support for a government that does not share American values or interests. This agreement could lead to the United States sending young men and women to fight for an interventionist dictatorship with a track record replete with human rights violations. Furthermore, it would lay a framework for other dictatorships in the region to exploit fears within the U.S. government that Washington is losing its influence in the Middle East to rivals, allowing them to propose further American security guarantees that threaten to drag America into a war against its interests.⁶³

If Not the “Mega-Deal,” then What?

Instead of making deals that would further entangle the United States in the Middle East and guarantee support for countries that defy American values and interests, the United States must thoroughly reexamine its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The United States must remove itself from the Middle East and not attempt to deepen its ties with Riyadh. To ensure that the U.S. government withdraws from its present relationship with Saudi Arabia, it is recommended that Washington implement the following policies:

- End arms sales to Saudi Arabia and withdraw American troops from the country.
- Reexamine and and reengage talks with Iran if and once feasible
- Continue to invest in renewable energy solutions that transition the United States away from reliance on oil from Saudi Arabia.

Withdraw American Troops

The presence of more than 2,700 U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia is a driving cause of anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. During the Gulf War, it made strategic sense for U.S. troops to be stationed in the Saudi Kingdom. Iraq borders the Kingdom and just invaded Kuwait, another country bordering the Saudis. The absence of American and coalition troops could have led to further escalation on the Arabian Peninsula and an obstruction to the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf, which was still a necessary resource for the United States at the time.

Yet while President Bill Clinton opted for a policy of “dual containment” where the U.S. military would keep troops stationed in the Middle East to quell the influences of both Iraq and Iran, it would have most likely been more beneficial for the United States in the long term to withdraw troops from the region and continue to let Iran and Iraq check each other. If the United States had withdrawn troops from Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden may have never attacked the United States.⁶⁴ While this cannot be guaranteed with certainty, the stationing of American troops on “holy soil” was a driving cause for his jihad against America. Removing troops would have eliminated one of the justifications of the attacks against the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, perhaps rendering them less likely.⁶⁵

Terminate American Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia

The United States also needs to refrain from selling arms to Saudi Arabia. When the Reagan Administration lobbied Congress to sell AWACS aircraft to the Saudis during the 1980s, it was done so out of fear of the spread of Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁶ Now, selling weapons to the Saudis is not in America's interest.

Saudi Arabia has not used the weapons America has sold it in the interest of the United States. When the Obama Administration began selling weapons to Riyadh at the onset of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, it was done so to appease the Saudis, who had been angered by the Iran nuclear deal.⁶⁷ However, the United States has since withdrawn from the agreement and doesn't need to support Saudi Arabia's disastrous campaign. Instead of using the weapons for precise offensives and strikes against rebel groups in Yemen such as the Houthis, they were used on numerous occasions against civilian areas such as ports and hospitals.

Today, the situation in Yemen is far worse than what it was when the civil war began. Eight years after the intervention commenced, nearly 400,000 people have died and approximately 21 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. While President Biden promised on the campaign trail to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah", his administration has since backtracked on this empty promise and is even pushing to make security guarantees for Riyadh in exchange for diplomatic relations with Israel.⁶⁸ Ending arms sales and withdrawing U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia could force the country to be held accountable for its actions and reexamine its own national security goals.

Although some may argue that this would not stop the Saudis from buying weapons from the likes of France, Germany, or even China, the United States lacks a sufficient interest in the Middle East that would make its complicity in Saudi Arabia's reckless driving a necessary evil. Reimagining this bilateral relationship would ultimately benefit America's stature as a country that promotes human rights and global accountability.

There is also the argument that these arms sales could

bolster the U.S. defense industry. While this is true, the United States must focus on its humanitarian footprint and the impression its militarism has left on the Middle East. In the long run, cutting off arms sales would be more beneficial to American foreign policy interests.

Dealing with Iran

Iran has been at the crossroads of America's foreign policy goals in the Middle East since the overthrow of the Shah during the 1970s. Washington lawmakers have continuously called for confrontation and even war with Iran despite it being in neither country's best interest.⁶⁹ Instead, the United States should seek to reengage talks with Iran on risk reduction and the nuclear portfolio, a policy that would not just benefit the two countries, but also Israel and the region as a whole. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, succeeded in reducing the threat of Iranian nuclear weapons more than confrontation has. In fact, 97% of Iran's nuclear stockpile was eliminated under the deal and only 300 kg of low-enriched uranium remained, which is not sufficient for a nuclear weapon.⁷⁰

Re-establishing direct diplomatic channels (if the Iranians are ready to do so) would benefit the Saudis as well. While both Saudi Arabia and Israel have sought to instill fears of Iran attacking both countries, a war with Iran would be detrimental to all sides and wreak destruction across the region. Iran has no business attacking Israel and Saudi Arabia in a conventional war and does not have the military might to do so, which is part of the reason why it continues to arm non-state actors such as Hamas, the Houthis, and Hezbollah to its bidding.⁷¹

Reengaging talks with Iran would shift both the United States and the Islamic Republic away from hostile policies that are increasingly driving the parties towards conflict. Since the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, Iran has gotten closer than ever to a developing a nuclear weapon.⁷² While diplomacy with Iran would require an increase from the United States in short term engagement with the Middle East (and require reciprocal interest from Tehran, not a given at the present moment), the long-term benefits of detente would allow the United States to shift its focus away

from countering Iran and ultimately move towards withdrawing from the Middle East.

Furthermore, the United States could use leverage to force Saudi Arabia to negotiate peace with Iran. Last year, both Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in talks brokered by China to establish a dialogue towards normalized relations between the two countries.⁷³ While it would've been monumental for the United States to lead these talks, the episode shows that the two largest powers in the Middle East are capable of dialogue without the presence of Washington and that the United States truly is not needed to establish peace in the Middle East.

Even though Israel has continuously raised concerns about Iran and seeks to establish a coalition against it, Israel should not be greatly concerned about the threats from Tehran.⁷⁴ Israel has a much more sophisticated military and is battle tested compared to Iran. Furthermore, Israel has stockpiled approximately 90 nuclear weapons, and enough fissile material to make upwards of 100 more, something Iran does not have and is not close to acquiring despite the fallout of the JCPOA.⁷⁵ Making amends with Iran ultimately is in the best interest for Saudi Arabia and the United States. It would quell a regional arms race and would allow the U.S. military to loosen its presence in the Middle East.

Continuing to Invest in Renewable Energy

Oil has been the focal point of the U.S.-Saudi relationship for over 75 years. However, we are now in a time where America is not as reliant on Saudi oil as it was previously. As explained earlier in this paper, the United States has continuously imported less and less oil from Riyadh in recent years. Furthermore, the United States is not even the country that Saudi Arabia sells the most oil to anymore. It is China, the main rival to the United States in the 21st century.⁷⁶ Despite this, Saudi Arabia continues to buy most of its weapons from Washington and has used them in ways that violate America's overall interests.

America's renewable energy sector is the second largest in the world and continues to grow each year. By 2050, it is estimated that renewable energy will provide 42% of the United States' energy needs as

opposed to 20% today. This is even more reason for the United States to reexamine its relationship with Saudi Arabia. America is continuing to pursue alternative energy solutions, making the demand for Saudi oil unnecessary and obsolete within the coming decades. Even Riyadh has recognized this, which is why it has decided to pursue other ventures such as the Vision 2030 project, which hopes to diversify Saudi Arabia's private sector exports from oil.

Outside of renewable energy, the United States has robust oil reserves in its own right, which can be used instead of oil from the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, America has produced more oil than it needs and has become more energy independent than it has in nearly 70 years. If the United States were to increase the importation of oil, it would also have several alternatives to Saudi Arabia such as Canada and Latin American allies such as Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia. As more Americans want a balance between oil and renewable energy, America is no longer reliant on Saudi oil and doesn't have a strategic interest in providing security guarantees for the Saudis. With the United States continuing to decrease imports from Saudi Arabia over the course of the next decade, this relationship will be increasingly one-sided, characterized by the sale of American arms that Washington itself knows will be misused, in exchange for precious little.

Conclusion

The era of security for oil between the United States and Saudi Arabia has come to an end. The United States no longer has a strategic interest in working as closely with the Kingdom and therefore must reexamine its relationship and shift its focus to downsizing its ties to Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia has continuously undermined America's interests in the Middle East while reaping the rewards of continued arms deals from Washington. In addition, the weapons given to Saudi Arabia have been used to commit atrocities in Yemen and have even been sold to groups such as al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the September 11 attacks. While the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia was necessary to protect key U.S. interests during the Gulf War, the continued presence of troops in Islam's holiest

country has been perceived as a form of imperialism and has driven anti-American sentiment in the Middle East.

The threat of Iran has played a substantial role in shaping Washington's relationship with Riyadh. However, it would not be in either Iran or Saudi Arabia's interest to go to war with each other or continue their cold war that has been brewing since the 1970s. Both countries have even engaged in talks brokered by China, proving that American regional primacy is not necessary in establishing peace in the Middle East and it may even harm the process.

Saudi Arabia has also continued to defy American values such as democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. Working with a country such as Saudi Arabia is hypocritical to the promotion of American ideals abroad and undermines the sincerity of American foreign policy goals where Washington hopes to promote its values. While the United States has relied on Saudi oil for the past several decades, America has been able to develop its own energy independence and has invested a considerable amount in renewable energy to the point that it will be the main energy source of the United States within the next couple decades. Because of these reasons, it is best for Washington to thoroughly downsize its relationship with Riyadh, ultimately treating Riyadh as a country that does not have America's best interests in mind.

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