

Third Way

2020 Country Brief: Saudi Arabia and its role in Yemen

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2020 Country Brief: Saudi Arabia and its role in Yemen



The National Security Program

Takeaways

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a close security and economic partner of the United States for most of the Kingdom's history. But the United States cannot ignore Saudi Arabia's gruesome acts and abuses, nor allow them to be swept under the rug. The two countries have critical differences on a number of key issues, including those related to terrorism, human rights, and regional security threats.

Two particular actions taken by Saudi Arabia have caused Congress to revisit the US-Saudi relationship:

- Saudi-led military operations in Yemen that have killed thousands of innocent civilians and left millions on the brink of starvation; and

- The 2018 brutal murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi—a Saudi citizen and US resident—carried out by the Saudi government in Istanbul, Turkey.

In the face of Saudi Arabia's dangerous and destabilizing behavior, President Trump has doubled down on his support for the Kingdom and defied bipartisan congressional opposition to continue to sell arms to the Saudi government.

Instead of permitting President Trump to allow autocrats and dictators to operate with impunity and commit acts of unimaginable horror, Congress must reassert its foreign policy decision-making power, impose targeted consequences on the Kingdom for its actions, and withdraw support for Saudi-led military operations in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has been a close US security and economic partner, though the two countries diverge on a number of key issues.

The United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia share a number of foreign policy, security, and economic interests. However, over the years, the countries have differed on a number of critical issues.

US-Saudi relations trace their roots back to the 1930s, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded following a nearly 200-year alliance between a tribal leader and a prominent cleric from an ultra-conservative form of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism. Since that time, the House of Saud has been the ruling royal family of the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia was an important US partner during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. After Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, protecting Saudi Arabia's security became a core US foreign policy priority. Military cooperation between the two countries was solidified during the 1991 Gulf War, ¹ during which the United States had more than 500,000 troops stationed in the Kingdom, before the vast majority of these forces were withdrawn in 2003. ²

Today, the United States maintains a close security partnership with Saudi Arabia. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Saudi Arabia has been an important US counterterrorism partner, sharing valuable intelligence, disrupting terrorist cells, and providing financial support and leadership to a number of global counterterrorism and counter violent extremism initiatives. ³ The two countries agreed to a "Joint Strategic Vision Declaration" during President Trump's May 2017 trip to Riyadh that further solidified counterterrorism commitments. ⁴ The Kingdom remains an active member of the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS ⁵ and a partner in US operations against Al Qaeda's affiliate group in Yemen, Al

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The United States trains and advises Saudi security forces through an ongoing training mission.⁶

The United States and Saudi Arabia also have a number of close economic ties. In 2019, Saudi Arabia was the second largest US trading partner in the Middle East. Much of this was a result of US imports of hydrocarbons from Saudi Arabia and exports of weapons, machinery, and vehicles to Saudi Arabia.⁷ From fiscal years 2009 through 2017, the two countries concluded arms sales in aggregate of over \$76 billion.⁸ In 2017, President Trump signed a nearly \$110 billion deal on US military sales to the Kingdom spread out over the next decade.⁹ However, President Trump's claims that this new agreement would result in hundreds of thousands of jobs for Americans are grossly exaggerated.¹⁰ One estimate is that jobs from Saudi arms sales are actually only 20,000 to 40,000, which is more than ten times the 500,000 jobs number the President has used. The same assessment found that 10% of US arms sales to Saudi Arabia involve licenses for the production of US weapons overseas, further impacting job creation.¹¹ US imports from Saudi Arabia of crude oil and petroleum products have also declined in recent years due to increases in domestic oil production, with Saudi oil representing 6% of total US oil imports.¹²

In addition, the United States and Saudi Arabia have closely coordinated on civil nuclear activities. In 2008, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which solidified their cooperation on a variety of civil nuclear activities. The Trump Administration has renewed discussions with Saudi Arabia about a further significant bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement between the two countries known as a "123 agreement," despite significant concern from Congress around the ethics of such negotiations.¹³ Congress has introduced several bills to ensure that Saudi Arabia abandons uranium enrichment and reprocessing—reflecting concern that, without these protections, the Saudis could use US support to build nuclear weapons.¹⁴ The FY2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act also restricted use of funding to support nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia until adoption of a 123 agreement that includes these protections.¹⁵

Despite all of these areas of cooperation, the United States and Saudi Arabia have diverged on many key issues of importance. While the Saudi government has been a close US counterterrorism partner, concerns remain about the country's support for, or ignoring of, a variety of nongovernmental actors that experts believe have contributed to radicalization and violent extremism.¹⁶ The financing of a spectrum of global violent extremist groups by wealthy Saudi individuals remains a significant issue.¹⁷

Additionally, the two countries disagree on key human rights concerns. The Kingdom remains an absolute monarchy with no democracy and strict restrictions on all civil liberties. The government has cracked down on groups and individuals advocating for political change and has arbitrarily detained and prosecuted advocates and journalists. Of significant concern,

Saudi Arabia continues to severely restrict women's rights and their ability to make basic decisions about their lives. A number of women's rights activists have been arrested and remain in jail due to their peaceful advocacy for change.¹⁸ President Obama raised concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses directly with Saudi officials on a number of occasions.¹⁹ President Trump and his Administration have refused to do the same.²⁰

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (colloquially known as MbS)—named by the Saudi king as his designated successor in 2017²¹—initially committed to taking steps to modernize the Kingdom. His 2017 repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia led some to hope that further societal reforms would follow. While some changes have been made—including to the country's repressive and discriminatory guardianship system that restrict women's rights—many restrictions and human rights abuses remain.²² The Crown Prince has been responsible for a number of actions that have drawn global criticism, including severe human rights abuses, even before the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.²³

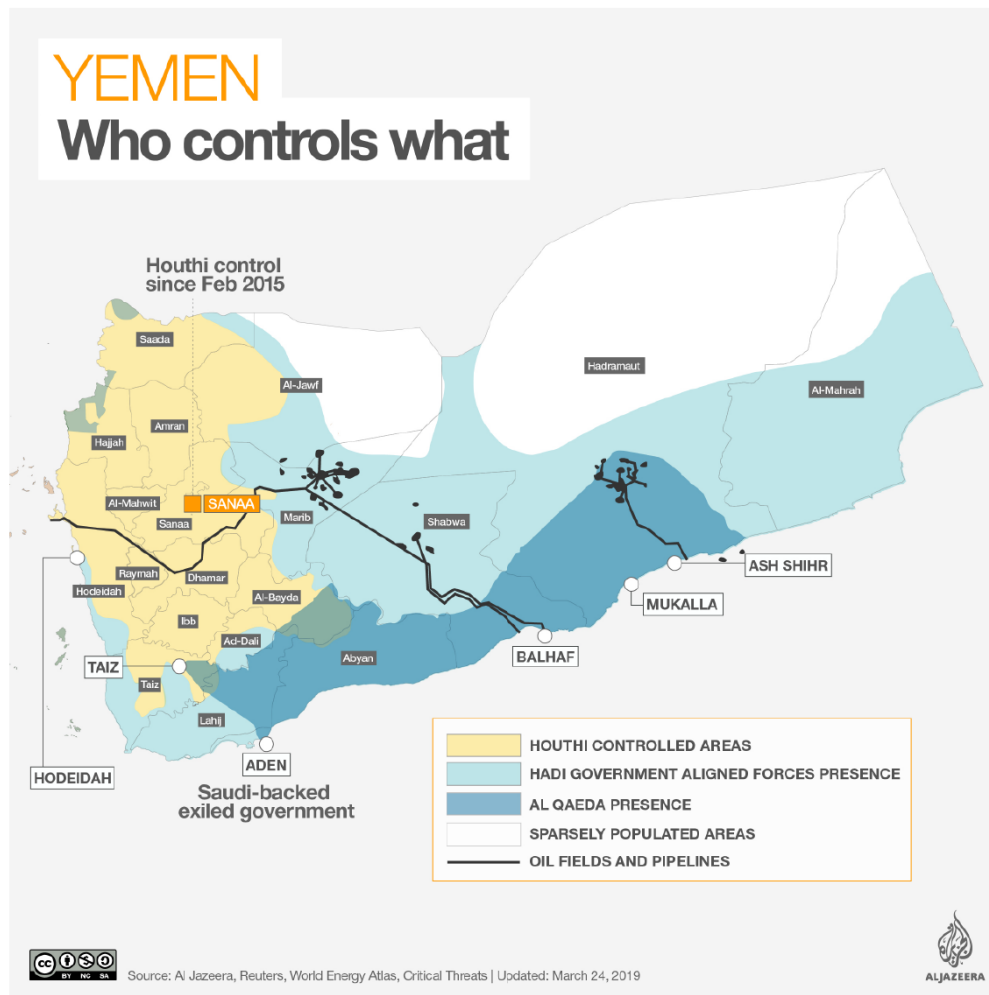
The United States and the Kingdom also differed on a number of core regional security issues during the Obama Administration. In particular, Saudi Arabia strongly opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or "Iran Deal"), which was signed by President Obama and effectively froze Iran's nuclear weapons programs while putting in place a strong inspection system to spot any cheating. President Trump pulled the United States out of the deal in May 2018.²⁴ Now, if the deal fully breaks down and Iran resumes all aspects of its nuclear program, Saudi Arabia has said it will also build a nuclear weapon, potentially starting an arms race.²⁵

Since 9/11, Saudi Arabia has been viewed as a key US partner on a number of mutual security and economic interests. However, the two countries have strongly disagreed on a number of key issues of concern. As a result of the Kingdom's actions, many on Capitol Hill are attempting to limit or end US support to Saudi Arabia.

The Trump Administration has doubled down on US support to Saudi Arabia despite the country's recent destabilizing and dangerous actions.

President Trump has made support to Saudi Arabia a central tenet of his strategy in the Middle East. He has not wavered in the face of the Kingdom's increasingly destabilizing and repugnant actions. Although Saudi Arabia has been escalating the conflict in Yemen over the past several years, the country's 2018 killing of a US permanent resident journalist tipped the scales on a growing unease about US support for Saudi military operations in Yemen and the United States' overall relationship with the country.

Saudi Arabia launched military operations in the neighboring Republic of Yemen in 2015 after the Houthi movement and backers of the late previous Yemeni president ousted the country's transitional government. These operations were aimed at reversing Houthi territorial strongholds in Yemen and compelling the group to negotiate with Yemen's transitional leadership. Further complicating the conflict, Iran—Saudi Arabia's traditional rival—has backed the Houthis with ongoing support. The Saudis have led a coalition air campaign that has conducted strikes across Yemen. This campaign has been supported by the United States, which has provided training for Saudi forces, logistical assistance, refueling of aircraft belonging to the Saudi-led coalition, and intelligence, with weaponry purchased from US defense companies. The Trump Administration has ended the refueling support while continuing support in other areas.²⁶ The air campaign was coupled with joint Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) ground operations, although the UAE has since withdrawn at least some of these troops.²⁷



Source: Chughtai, Alia and Faisal Edroos. "Yemen conflict: Who controls what." Al Jazeera, 24 Mar. 2019, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/yemen-conflict-controls-160814132104300.html. Accessed 14 July 2020.

Saudi operations in Yemen have caused devastating loss of human life and one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Often seen as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, some estimates put the numbers killed in the conflict at over 100,000 people.²⁸ The United Nations (UN) estimates over 10 million people are facing acute food shortages in Yemen due, in large part, to the Saudi blockade of Yemen's borders and sanctions on the country, which have hindered the delivery of humanitarian assistance.²⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic has made this devastating humanitarian crisis even worse.³⁰ The Saudi-led coalition's indiscriminate bombings have long brought strong criticism from Members of Congress, including Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Mike Lee (R-UT), and Rand Paul (R-KY), Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA), and others.³¹ The Houthis have also been criticized for hitting civilians and perpetrating severe human rights abuses in Yemen while continuing to launch drone and missile strikes on the Saudi-led coalition.³²

Still, President Trump has maintained his strong support for the Saudi-led operations in Yemen. In 2016, President Obama reduced US personnel support for Saudi operations in Yemen and limited certain arms transfers out of concern about the growing crisis. President Trump overturned these limitations.³³ Further, in September 2018, the Trump Administration certified that the Saudi and UAE governments were undertaking actions to reduce the risk of civilian harm in their operations in Yemen,³⁴ despite numerous reports from the UN and other groups to the contrary.³⁵ In November 2018, the US Defense Department said it would stop refueling Saudi fighter planes for its operations in Yemen. However, the Trump Administration has continued to resist any further substantial changes in US support to the Saudis.³⁶ President Trump has vetoed several pieces of legislation in order to keep selling weapons to Saudi Arabia and support the country's operations in Yemen, despite bipartisan congressional opposition and Saudi Arabia's continual targeting of civilians.³⁷ UN-mediated negotiations to try to broker an agreement to end the conflict in Yemen are ongoing.³⁸

The killing by the Saudi government of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident and Saudi citizen, brought the Kingdom's actions in Yemen to the forefront of congressional debates on the US-Saudi relationship. In October 2018, Khashoggi, a well-known critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was murdered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. The US intelligence community has reportedly determined that the Crown Prince ordered the assassination of Khashoggi in retaliation for his public criticism;³⁹ however, the Trump Administration has continued to publicly deny this.⁴⁰ Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) noted, after receiving a classified briefing on the killing from Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Gina Haspel, that "You have to be willfully blind not to come to the conclusion that this was orchestrated and organized by people under the command of MbS and that he was intricately involved in the demise of Mr. Khashoggi."⁴¹ A 2019 investigation, led by an independent, appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur, found that the killing of Jamal Khashoggi was "an arbitrary and extrajudicial execution for which the State of Saudi Arabia is responsible."⁴² Saudi Arabia has admitted that Khashoggi was killed in its consulate and has convicted a number of people in connection with the journalist's death but continues to deny the Crown Prince's role in the killing.⁴³

Despite the US intelligence community's assessment to the contrary, President Trump has refused to acknowledge the Crown Prince's role in this killing.⁴⁴ The US government has imposed sanctions on 17 individuals it says are linked to the assassination, yet the president refuses to take action against or even directly condemn the Crown Prince.⁴⁵ In doing so, President Trump has shown that he is willing to put profits from arms sales above US values, which will signal to autocrats and dictators around the globe that they can take similar actions with no repercussions. This threatens US interests around the globe, as these actions may only serve to generate more grievances that allow conflict and terrorism to thrive.

Congress has an opportunity to rebalance the US-Saudi relationship and reassert its authority in the disastrous foreign policy decisions President Trump makes.

Congress has an opportunity to reassert its authority in foreign policy decision making and rebalance the US–Saudi relationship. Saudi Arabia has been a US counterterrorism partner since after 9/11. Yet it must be clear to the Kingdom that America will not just provide a blank check—but will hold them accountable for their actions.

To do so, bipartisan majorities in the House and Senate have passed a number of pieces of legislation aimed at blocking US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and ending US support to Saudi Arabia’s operations in Yemen.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, President Trump vetoed several of these legislative actions, and a vote to override the president’s veto on a resolution to end US support to Saudi Arabia’s operations in Yemen failed to gain enough votes in the Senate.⁴⁷ Congress must continue to look for further ways to restrict US arms sales to Saudi Arabia despite the Administration’s blind support to the Kingdom. Democrats’ efforts to use congressional oversight actions to investigate ongoing negotiations and deals around Saudi arms sales also deserve support.⁴⁸ Further, Congress should consider legislation that has been introduced to ramp up humanitarian support to Yemen—particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic’s devastating impact—and promote US leadership to address the deliberate blocking of humanitarian access. Congress may also look for further ways to push for US leadership in supporting UN-mediated negotiations and imposing consequences on parties who are not meaningfully engaging in these negotiations.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia and the United States share a number of mutual security and economic interests. However, Saudi actions in Yemen and its murder of a US-resident journalist demonstrate the country is capable of dangerous and destabilizing behavior. Instead of criticizing the Saudi Crown Prince for ordering this murder, as concluded by the US intelligence community, President Trump has doubled down on his support to the Crown Prince. This action sends a signal to autocrats and dictators everywhere that the United States will continue to support them no matter what actions they take. Rather than allow this to be the status quo, Congress must work to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for its actions and further examine ways to rebalance the US–Saudi relationship in light of the Kingdom’s actions.

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