

Country Brief: Saudi Arabia and its role in Yemen

Takeaways

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a close security and economic partner of the United States since the Kingdom's early founding. However, the two countries have differences on a number of key issues, including those related to terrorism, human rights, and regional security threats.

But two actions taken by Saudi Arabia have caused Congress to consider changes to the US-Saudi relationship over the past year:

1. Saudi-led military operations in Yemen that have killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians and left millions on the brink of starvation; and
2. The 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 recent dangerous and destabilizing behavior, President Trump has doubled down on his support for the Kingdom.

Instead of permitting President Trump to allow autocrats and dictators to operate with impunity, Congress must work to reassert its foreign policy decision making, impose targeted consequences on the Kingdom for its recent 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, they 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 who followed 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the United States had more than 500,000 troops stationed in the Kingdom before the vast majority of these forces were withdrawn in 2003.²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 ISIS⁵ 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 2017, Saudi Arabia was the largest US trading partner in the Middle East. Much of this was a result of US imports of hydrocarbons and US exports of weapons, machinery, and vehicles to Saudi Arabia.⁷ From fiscal years 2009 through 2016, the two countries concluded arms sales in aggregate of over \$65 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 exaggerated—only half of this money is estimated to be spent in the United States.¹⁰ Further, while US imports from Saudi Arabia of crude oil and petroleum products has declined in recent years with increases in domestic oil production,¹¹ Saudi oil still represents about 11% 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.”¹³ In the last Congress, several bills were introduced aimed at ensuring that any such agreement has strong commitments by Saudi Arabia to forgo uranium enrichment and reprocessing, out of concerns that, without these protections, the Saudis could use this US support to help build nuclear weapons.¹⁴

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, and ignoring of, a variety of actors outside the government that experts believe have contributed to radicalization and violent extremism that have led to terrorism globally.¹⁵ The financing of a spectrum of global violent extremist groups by wealthy Saudi individuals remains a significant issue.¹⁶

Additionally, the two countries have disagreed 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.¹⁷ President Obama raised concerns about Saudi Arabia’s human rights abuses directly with Saudi officials on a number of occasions.¹⁸ President Trump and his Administration have refused to do the same.¹⁹

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (colloquially known as MbS), named by the Saudi king as his designated successor in 2017,²⁰ initially committed to taking steps to modernize the Kingdom. His 2017 lifting of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia led some to hope that further societal reforms would follow. Instead, the Crown Prince has been responsible for a

number of actions that have drawn global criticism, including severe human rights abuses, even before the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.²¹

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 2018.²² Now, if the deal fully breaks down and Iran resumes its nuclear program, Saudi Arabia has said it will also build a nuclear weapon, potentially starting a regional arms race.²³

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 United States 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.

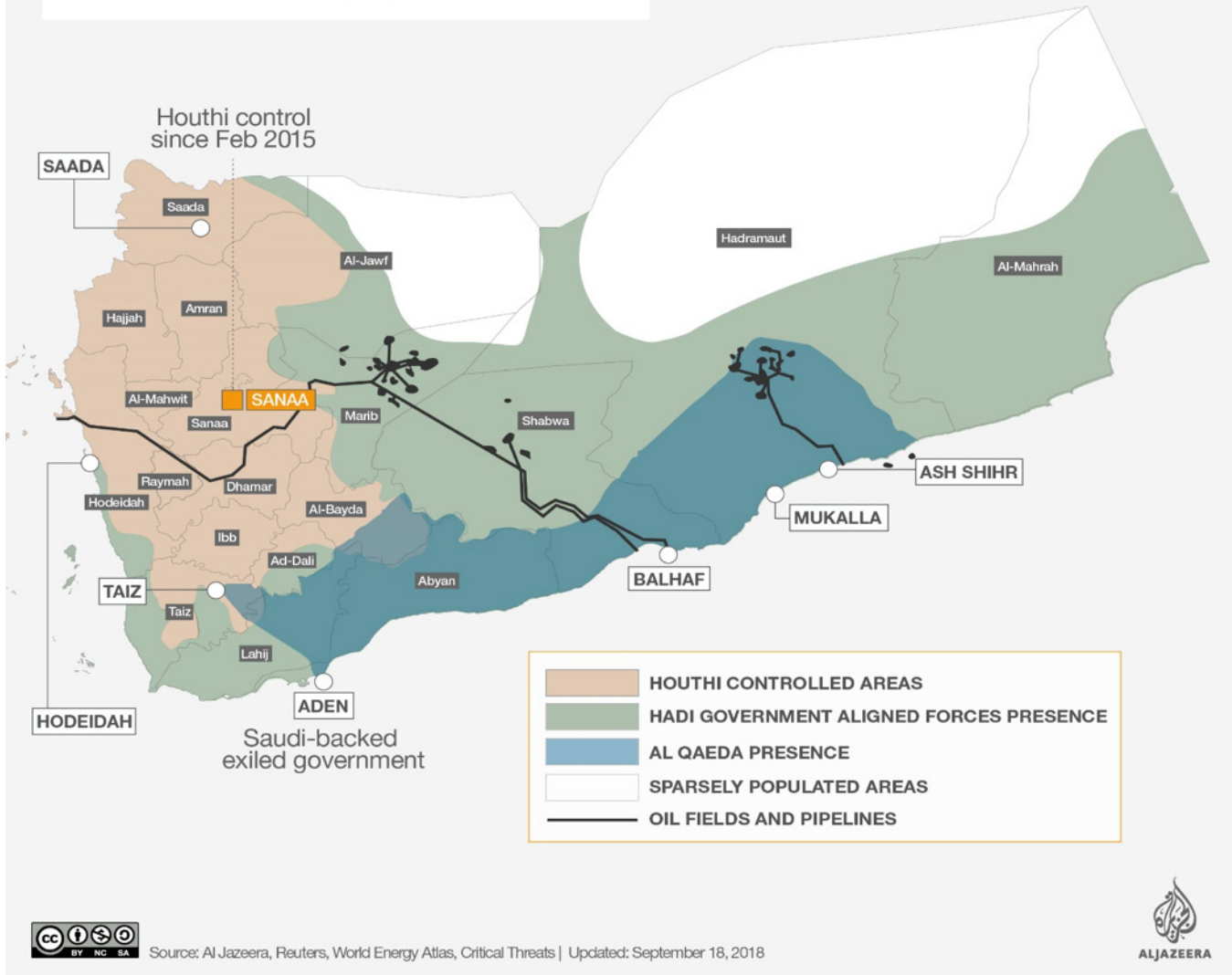
President Trump has made support to Saudi Arabia a central tenet of his strategy in the Middle East. He has not wavered in the face of the Kingdom’s increasingly destabilizing and repugnant actions. Although Saudi Arabia has been escalating the conflict in Yemen over the past several years, the country’s recent 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 are aimed at reversing Houthi territorial strongholds in Yemen and compelling the group to negotiate with Yemen’s UN-recognized 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 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. This air campaign has been coupled with joint Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) ground operations.

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, the conflict has killed an estimated 57,000 people. The United Nations (UN) estimates over 8 million people are facing famine 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.²⁴ 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), Rand Paul (R-KY), Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA), and others.²⁵ 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.²⁶

YEMEN

Who controls what



Source: Chughtai, Alia and Faisal Edroos. "Yemen conflict: Who controls what." *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera Media Network, 19 Sept. 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/yemen-conflict-controls-160814132104300.html>, Accessed 14 Dec. 2018.

Yet, 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 concerns about the growing crisis. President Trump overturned these limitations.²⁷ 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,²⁸ despite numerous reports from the UN and other groups to the contrary.²⁹ 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 double down in resisting any further substantial changes in US support to the Saudis.³⁰ At the time of writing, UN-mediated peace talks between the Yemeni government and Houthis were ongoing.³¹

The killing by the Saudi government of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident and Saudi citizen, has 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.³² 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."³³ Saudi Arabia has admitted that Khashoggi was killed in its consulate and has detained a number of people in connection with the journalist's death but continues to deny the Crown Prince's role in the killing.³⁴

Despite the US Intelligence Community's assessment to the contrary, President Trump has also refused to acknowledge the Crown Prince's role in this killing.³⁵ 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.³⁶ In doing so, the president has shown that he is willing to put profits from arms sales over US values, which will signal to autocrats and dictators around the globe that they too can take similar actions with no repercussions. This threatens United States' interests because these actions may only serve to generate more grievances among populations around the globe that have created the conditions 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 now has an opportunity to reassert its authority in foreign policy decision making and rebalance the US-Saudi relationship. Saudi Arabia is a US counterterrorism partner that has provided valuable intelligence to thwart terrorist attacks on America. Yet it must be clear to the Kingdom that America will not just provide a blank check and will hold its partners accountable for their actions when it is required.

To do so, in 2018, Congress considered legislation to end US support for Saudi Arabia's role in the conflict in Yemen, place sanctions on the Saudi Crown Prince for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and on those who block humanitarian access in Yemen or aid the Houthis, and suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia.³⁷ In December 2018, the Senate passed a joint resolution with bipartisan support that requires the president to remove any support provided by US military forces from hostilities in or around Yemen (except for operations directed at Al Qaeda).³⁸ Senate passage of this resolution was an important signal to the Trump Administration and the Saudi government that Congress will not provide endless support to countries, even partners, who perpetrate violence and crime that runs counter to America's interests. The Senate also passed a resolution supporting a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Yemen and condemning the Crown Prince for his role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.³⁹ Resolutions have been reintroduced in the House of Representatives and Senate to direct the removal of US armed forces from the hostilities in Yemen. At the time of writing, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs approved their version

of this resolution and it must now be considered in the full House of Representatives.⁴⁰ Congress should approve such a resolution and consider additional bills to impose costs on Saudi Arabia for its actions.⁴¹

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia and the United States share a number of mutual security and economic interests. However, the Saudi actions in Yemen, which have been aided by the United States and left tens of thousands dead and millions starving, and its recent murder of a US-resident journalist demonstrate the country is also 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 the US-Saudi relationship may need to be rebalanced in light of recent events.

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