

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Case of Jamal Khashoggi: America's Obsolete Alliance with Saudi Arabia

By Evan N. Resnick

Synopsis

The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia has been rocked by Turkish officials' allegation that the conservative kingdom orchestrated the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Historically, US administrations have overlooked far more egregious human rights violations by unsavoury allies of convenience if the geopolitical stakes warranted. It is increasingly difficult to make that case with respect to Saudi Arabia.

Commentary

THE UNITED States' perennially controversial relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been rocked over the past few weeks by the explosive allegation that the Saudi authorities orchestrated the killing of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi. According to Turkish government sources, on 2 October 2018, Khashoggi, a critic of the Saudi government, was murdered and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by a hit squad that Riyadh had dispatched prior to his scheduled meeting at the facility.

Although this news has unleashed an international media frenzy and sparked a bipartisan outcry in the US Congress, the Trump administration's reaction has been conspicuously low-key. Most notably, President Donald Trump has refused to suspend tens of billions of dollars' worth of planned arms sales to Saudi Arabia. According to the president, not only would such a move be economically "foolish", but even more importantly, it would also jeopardise America's geopolitical interests in the Middle East, where "Saudi Arabia has been a very important ally of ours". Trump's reluctance to interfere with the flow of arms to Riyadh is particularly concerning in light of credible reports that since its 2015 invasion of Yemen, the US-armed Saudi military has engaged in a ghastly range of horrific attacks against Yemeni civilians.

Trump's Not-So-Idiosyncratic Position

Several critics have attributed Trump's position to idiosyncratic factors, such as the president's peculiar affinity for dictators, his enmity towards the media, or the Trump Organisation's rumoured indebtedness to the Saudis. While these possibilities cannot be ruled out, it nevertheless bears noting that all US presidential administrations since the end of World War II have downplayed and ignored Saudi Arabia's consistently wretched human rights record.

In doing so, they were able to ensure sufficient domestic support to enlist and retain the oil-rich kingdom as an ally of convenience against a succession of shared adversaries. These have included the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Gamel Abdel Nasser's Egypt during the 1960's, revolutionary Iran during the 1980's, Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1990's, Al Qaeda after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and most recently, both the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Iran again.

More broadly, during times of extreme danger to US national security, American presidents have exhibited extraordinary cynicism in whitewashing some of modern history's most barbarous massacres by their autocratic alliance partners. To take just one especially infamous example, at the height of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt quashed appeals by the Polish government-in-exile in London to investigate the mass slaughter of over 20,000 Polish officers at the Katyn Forest in April 1940 by America's Soviet ally.

Low Stakes in Middle East

By contrast, the current geopolitical stakes for the US in the Middle East are low. First, Saudi Arabia's envious position as the world's most important "swing producer" of oil has deteriorated over the last several years owing to the increased diversification of global oil production. This deterioration is most dramatically underscored by the US' recent displacement of the Kingdom as the world's leading oil producer.

Second, the jihadi terrorist threat that has emanated from the Middle East (and which Saudi Arabia did much to engender), has receded dramatically owing to the annihilation of Al Qaeda and ISIS at the hands of the US military and its allies. Third, although brokering on-again, off-again peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians has been a high US priority since the early 1990's, neither Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories nor Palestinian terrorism against Israelis constitute even a serious threat to the security of the US.

Even the most compelling geopolitical rationale for maintaining the alliance with the Saudis, namely, the need to contain Iran, is dubious. Over the course of its nearly two years in office, the Trump administration has relentlessly demonised Iran for its interventionism in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, as well as Tehran's proliferation of ballistic missiles and undiminished support for proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

These hostile activities belie the reality that Iran remains a weak, underdeveloped state that can be readily counterbalanced by its many surrounding enemies. These include all of the Sunni Arab states, as well as the Middle East's predominant military

power, Israel, which possesses the region's only nuclear arsenal. To wit, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Iran's US\$14 billion military budget in 2017 (as measured in constant 2016 US dollars), was dwarfed by the combined defence spending of its two foremost regional enemies of Saudi Arabia and Israel, which amounted to \$85 billion.

Wake Up Call for US Grand Strategy

The Khashoggi scandal should serve as a wakeup call, not only for decades of US obsequiousness towards its unsavoury Saudi ally of convenience, but also and more importantly, for America's drifting grand strategy. Since 9/11, successive administrations in Washington DC have focused their attention and resources overarchingly on the Middle East.

By comparison, they have been habitually distracted from events in the Asia Pacific, which is the only part of the world that hosts a viable peer competitor capable of threatening the survival of the US, namely a rising and expansionist China. Even the Obama administration, which ostentatiously embarked on a "rebalance to Asia," nevertheless found itself surging tens of thousands of troops into the unnecessary and still ongoing war in Afghanistan and redeploying thousands of troops to Iraq to combat ISIS.

It would behoove the Trump administration to consider the Khashoggi killing an opportunity to finish the job that Trump's predecessor failed to complete, by prudently reorienting US strategy from the increasingly peripheral Middle East to the increasingly integral Asia Pacific. The recent repackaging of America's strategic interests in Asia under an Indo-Pacific vision requires substantive policy attention by Washington DC. One step President Trump can offer as redress is to initiate the attachment of onerous new conditions to any future US arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Evan Resnick is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the United States Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is the author of the book Allies of Convenience: A Theory of Bargaining in US Foreign Policy, which is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg