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PRO-CON

Should the US cut ties with Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi affair?



AP Photo/Letteris Pitarakis

Mourners protesting the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi hold a candlelight vigil outside Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul last month.

PRO: Cut ties with Saudi and stop supplying its bombing of Yemen

WASHINGTON — Each day since Oct. 2, new evidence has emerged that the killing of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a resident of Virginia, was a premeditated murder.

At the same time, it is also increasingly clear that the murder was approved at the highest levels of the Saudi Arabian government, most likely including the current ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

The Saudis at first maintained that Khashoggi had left the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, alive; they then claimed, incredulously, that he was killed there in the course of a fist fight.

But we also know that a team of 15 Saudis, including “an autopsy expert” and others with links to Saudi high officials and intelligence, was flown in at dawn on Oct. 2.

In the past four years, the United States has supplied 60 percent of Saudi arms purchases — many of which are used to kill civilians in Yemen.

Should the U.S. government cut off weapons sales to Saudi Arabia in response to this atrocity? Of course it should. But President Donald Trump has opposed this measure, and The Washington Post reports that Congress might not even have a chance to vote on it.

However, there is something vastly more important and obvious that the U.S. Congress can do — regardless of what Trump wants — about Saudi atrocities. The Congress can stop U.S. participation in the Saudis’ genocidal war in Yemen.

Since 2015, the U.S. military has been providing mid-air refueling to Saudi and UAE planes conducting airstrikes that have killed thousands of civilians in Yemen — including a school bus with 40 children that was hit by a U.S.-supplied bomb in August.

These bombing raids also have hit water, sewage, and other vital infrastructure, causing thousands more deaths and a million people infected with cholera.

But most catastrophically, the air strikes and the Saudi blockade and siege of Yemen’s major port city have caused the

worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, with 14 million people on the brink of starvation, according to the UN.

The New York Times editorial board has noted that the Saudis were trying to “starve Yemen into submission,” a strategy that constituted “war crimes.”

Until recently, the Saudi and UAE bombers were dependent on mid-air refueling from U.S. planes. The U.S. also provides assistance with targeting and intelligence and logistics.

There are currently bipartisan bills in both Houses of Congress to cut off U.S. participation in the war.

House Concurrent Resolution 138, introduced by Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), has 56 co-sponsors. These include high-level leadership, such as the ranking Democratic members of the Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, Appropriations, and Judiciary Committees.

The Senate bill, led by Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), and Mike Lee (R-Utah), got 44 votes in February and is likely to get a majority in the wake of the Khashoggi murder.

These bills have been introduced under the 1973 War Powers Resolution, a law that reinforced the Constitution’s provision that Congress should decide whether or not the US military should be deployed in war.

Under the two resolutions, if the Congress votes to end U.S. military participation in the Saudi war, the president will have 30 days to withdraw.

In the coming months, tens of thousands of people across the country will be contacting their representatives and senators to persuade them to vote to end this war that has nothing to do with U.S. national security.

They will be up against some of the most powerful interests in the world: the military-industrial complex — including the weapons manufacturers that Trump has expressed concerns about — as well as the national security state. But if enough people participate in this effort, the war will end.

Mark Weisbrot is co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research and the president of Just Foreign Policy.



MARK WEISBROT

CON: Khashoggi’s killing was despicable, but US needs Saudi help in keeping Mideast peace

WASHINGTON — Let’s be clear: the Saudi murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi was a despicable act by a regime that, even after enacting modest reforms recently, still tolerates virtually no domestic dissent.

We should all be outraged, we should demand the truth, and we should look for ways to condemn such action in the clearest terms, such as by sanctioning the regime and the individuals involved.

But let’s be clear about something else: The world can be, as Thomas Hobbes said of the natural state of humanity, “nasty, brutish, and short.”

Though, particularly in the post-World War II period, the United States has promoted freedom and democracy, it also has made its necessary “deals with devils” in the interests of arms control, regional stability and other short-term demands.

Washington’s relationship with Riyadh is one such deal, and our urgent needs across the Middle East do not allow us the luxury of making the morally pure decision of severing all ties with the kingdom.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship dates back to an early 1945 meeting between Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz aboard the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal, in which FDR agreed to provide the Saudis with support and military training in exchange for Saudi oil and its support for the United States in the region.

That meeting came four years after FDR, in his State of the Union address, expressed hopes that, after the war, people all over the world would enjoy “four freedoms” — of speech and religion and from want and fear.

While idealistic, however, FDR had no illusions that the Saudi kingdom would abandon its hardline Islamic rule and provide such freedoms to its people. He simply made a necessary deal with this devil.

Fast forward to today’s Middle East, where the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” often applies.

The United States needs Saudi support to rein in the America-hating, terror-sponsoring, nuclear weapons-pursuing, regional destabilizing and human rights-abusing regime in Iran.



LAWRENCE J. HAAS

Directly or through proxies, Tehran now controls in large measure the governments of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq; it’s propping up Syria’s Bashar Assad as he slaughters his own people; and it’s sending increasingly lethal weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, just across Israel’s border.

Washington plans to reimpose sanctions against Iran next month that it hopes will cut all Iranian oil exports; these sanctions will force companies to choose between doing business with Iran and with America.

U.S. officials also hope to convince SWIFT, the global financial messaging service, to sever ties with Iran, which would more fully isolate the Islamic Republic from the global economy.

Among other things, Washington needs Riyadh, the region’s leading Sunni Muslim government, to provide enough oil to calm oil markets — if U.S. sanctions against Tehran, the leading Shia power, rattle the markets enough to potentially send oil prices sky-high and threaten the global economy.

Tehran, which seeks regional hegemony, is a major concern of not just Washington but also of such unlikely allies as Jerusalem and Riyadh.

Though they share no peace treaty, Saudi-Israeli relations have never been warmer or more public, driven by their joint fear of, and cooperation to contain, an expansionist Iran that wants to destroy Israel and weaken Saudi Arabia.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia is ruled by an intolerant, sometimes vicious, regime.

Over time, we should encourage the kingdom to expand its modest reforms and provide more freedom to its people. That’s no different than what we’ve done for decades with autocratic allies and adversaries alike.

For U.S. interests in the region, however, Saudi Arabia is clearly a lesser evil than Iran.

Put simply, we need Riyadh too much, as we seek to contain an insidious force in the Middle East, to sever ties with it.

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