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OPINION | The Danger of Washington Succumbing to a “Riyadh Consensus”

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U.S. President Donald Trump's speech to Arab leaders at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh on May 21 was noteworthy for several reasons. The president displayed his ability to stay on script, recasting his previous anti-Muslim rhetoric into a sort of Manichean struggle between good and evil and asking that the rest of the Sunni Arab world join him in combating Islamic terrorism. But the most significant segment of the speech was no doubt the characterization of Iran as the greatest purveyor of Islamic terrorism in the world, bringing Washington unequivocally in line with a sort of "Riyadh consensus" on the Middle East's security landscape.

While Trump's call for counterterrorism unity was no doubt genuine, past presidents have made it before, with mediocre results. Saudi Arabia has been extremely helpful with intelligence and tactical support, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Yet the bolstering of militant Salafist-Jihadists in the region has been the Kingdom's consistent policy.

Although the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have maintained an enduring alliance based on pragmatic mutual interests for nearly a century – essentially, oil for security – rarely has a president so explicitly aligned Washington with Riyadh's agenda. Trump's speech was not just an affirmation of partnership; it was a declaration of commitment to the Saudi worldview pertaining to the geopolitics and security landscape of the region. Most importantly, the Trump administration is on board with Riyadh's anti-Iranian agenda.

The realpolitik of the U.S.-Saudi alliance is straightforward enough. Trump's new commitment, however, to what amounts to the Sunni "side" of the region's struggle for hegemony raises questions about the wisdom of the new American trajectory. His stated policy of "principled realism" suggests that the U.S. will seek to keep out of the fray of local politics and internecine conflicts, yet his summit speech indicates that America is becoming detrimentally tied to one regional power.

According to international relations theorist Stephen Walt, the U.S. maintains three strategic interests in the region - preserving the flow of oil and gas, mitigating the threat of anti-American terrorism, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - all of which depend on good relationships with a variety of states. After nearly a decade of U.S. blood and treasure expended in Iraq, it has now become all but a foregone conclusion that Iran is, and will remain, the primary foreign influence inside the country. The U.S. still retains considerable power and influence in Baghdad, but much will depend on how it manages

the Sunni-Shi'ite divide going forward. Iraq desires good relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the political, cultural, sectarian and geographical connections between Iraq and Iran run deep (despite tribal connections with the Nejd for some southern Iraqis) and should not be underestimated, particularly if Baghdad is put in a position where it must choose.

Likewise, while the future of Bashar al-Assad's regime remains unclear, its re-entrenchment following Russia's intervention along with renewed Iranian and Hezbollah efforts should be considered. This is particularly true when remembering that Trump is more focused on Daesh ("Islamic State") than on Assad. The same holds true for Lebanon, where President Michel Aoun and his Hezbollah allies remain close to Tehran. Indeed, the power structures in the Levant generally remain indebted to Iran and hostile to Saudi Arabia.

Throughout the post-war period until Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Washington effectively balanced close relationships with the Kingdom and the Shah's Iran, much to the chagrin of both. This approach was based on a realism that worked - not gambling solely on one power, and not allowing either one to become too powerful. The policy was geared toward preventing the kind of regional destabilization that a hegemon brings. This balance could be achieved again, given Iran's rational and pragmatic character. As Washington slowly slides into this "Riyadh consensus", it is instructive to remember the history of the U.S. relationship with Israel.

Beginning roughly with the founding of the Jewish State in 1948 through the mid-1990s, the U.S., although a solid and dependable ally of Israel, carefully calibrated its relationship with both Tel Aviv and the Arab states. This balance provided America with chess board-like leverage across a dozen Middle Eastern capitals. But at the start of the twenty-first century, U.S. policy slid firmly into the Likud-Kadima orbit. As a result, America's credibility in many Arab capitals, and its ability to manage peace with the Palestinians has grown increasingly slim.

In the process of drastically limiting its options, Washington must also consider Riyadh's internal stability and its ability to check Tehran. The Islamic Republic retains a fundamental stability that the Kingdom lacks. The House of Saud, on the other hand, is forced to play a balancing act between its religious extremists and the West, and finds itself in a constant state of reassessment. And with subsidies set to decline when oil prices stabilize, civil strife is possible. Meanwhile, regardless of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-led deep state in Iran, the country has once again displayed a powerful inclination toward democracy and reason. A massive voter turnout enabled the reelection of moderate President Hassan Rouhani over the IRGC's preferred candidate, Ebrahim Raisi.

Moreover, given Iran's 30 years of success in asymmetric warfare (and its stalemate with Iraq in the longest conventional war of the twentieth century), it is highly questionable whether Saudi Arabia, with no real-world combat experience to speak of other than its failing performance in Yemen, can compete with Tehran when it comes to warfare, conventional or, more importantly, unconventional.

Indeed, by all measures, Iran is an ascendant power in the beleaguered Arab world. This is particularly true as we see Russia bolstering its efforts to further patronize Tehran. This competition between Washington and Riyadh on one side and Moscow and Tehran on the other is nothing new. The Cold War offered similar challenges in the region with the U.S. backing conservative and pro-Western Arab sheikdoms with the Kremlin lending its support to Leftist, secular, and Arab nationalist regimes.

Today, however, Washington should remember that as a superpower it should have its own strategic agenda, and not simply adopt that of the Saudis. The U.S. response to the Qatar crisis ignores the strategic necessity of maintaining unity in the GCC (especially if seeking to counter Iran). At the same time, the muted American response, and President Trump's obvious feelings of schadenfreude following the June 7 Daesh attacks in Tehran contradict the stated primacy of U.S. counterterrorism efforts against the terror group. It appears that U.S. strategic concerns are being subordinated to Saudi ones.

History serves as a good teacher. The era during which the U.S. successfully balanced its relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as with Israel and the Arab powers, was a time of unparalleled American power, influence, and strategic success in the region. Ultimately, for Washington, the risk of further succumbing to a "Riyadh consensus" is that the U.S. could lose further influence in the Middle East.

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