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DEMOCRACY

— *Event Highlights* —

Toward a New U.S.-Saudi Relationship: Prioritizing Human Rights and Accountability

**Wednesday, December 9, 2020
10:00 am - 12:30 pm EST**

Watch the event [here](#). Read the event transcript [here](#).

Below are some of each speaker's key points.

PANEL 1 –

MAKING THE CASE: WHY THE U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP NEEDS TO CHANGE

Safa Al Ahmad

Acting Director, ALQST

- The Biden administration needs to make up for the actions of previous administrations. It was under the Obama administration's watch that the war in Yemen started and that the largest arms deal in the history of the United States was made with Saudi Arabia.
- The United States should be held responsible for what it claims are its own priorities of human rights and the law. It should stop endorsing the Saudi-UAE coalition's war in Yemen and stop its own role in the conflict. The United States is not only providing weapons to the coalition but also diplomatic and moral cover. Yemen is the worst humanitarian, man-made disaster in the world right now because of the direct relationship to how the United States has given cover to the Saudis and Emiratis in their behavior.
- There is a cumulative effect of impunity when it comes to what the Saudis do. That has taught the Saudis that the Americans are not willing to truly put pressure on them.
- The indicator that things are really truly escalating is how the people that were previously untouchable—the royals, the extremely rich families that had excellent connections with the king and the crown prince—are now in jail.

- None of what any U.S. administration says about how much they care about democracy or human rights in the Middle East actually matters when it is continuing to politically give the Saudi government cover in the UN. No resolutions are being passed because of it, and the United States insists on continuing to sell weapons to these countries when it knows exactly what their human rights records are and what they intend to do with them.

Aaron David Miller

Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

- The U.S.-Saudi relationship is not only broken, it is out of control. At home, you have a ruthless, reckless crown prince who has reached a new standard of repression and authoritarianism in an effort to justify and maintain control even as he introduced historic changes. And abroad, he is reversing traditional Saudi risk aversion, caution, and prudence, which has helped produce the worst humanitarian disaster in Yemen. He's also gone about bumbling and stumbling with respect to Lebanon and Qatar. His set of policies on repression, both at home and abroad, most notably have led to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.
- To call Saudi Arabia a U.S. ally is the worst kind of critical and unthinking logic. Allies are nations where there is a high degree of coincidence of both values and interests and there is a domestic base of support. At best, Saudi is a U.S. partner where there is an episodic alignment of interests, and it's hardly arguable whether the interests that do align offset Saudi transgressions.
- Washington has enabled Mohammed bin Salman. This administration has taken placating to levels of obeisance heretofore unseen in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, essentially creating a zone of immunity for bin Salman that has enabled and protected him.
- The oil-for-security tradeoff that has powered this relationship for the last seven decades has become increasingly fraught. We have a considerable stake in keeping the kingdom afloat and non-fractured until the world can fundamentally free itself from Arab hydrocarbons. In the meantime, this relationship needs accountability, transparency, reciprocity, and even conditionality.
- Under Republican and Democratic administrations since the late seventies, we have never made human rights, or even the promotion of democracy, the central tenet of American foreign policy. I wouldn't look for fundamental transformations in the way America deals with its problematic allies in the region. I would look realistically for transactions that involve a greater degree of accountability, and perhaps even conditionality, in the case of Saudi Arabia.

Sarah Leah Whitson

Executive Director, Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)

- America's support for abusive governments, such as the unreliable and unstable dictator monarchy in Saudi Arabia, makes us complicit, responsible, and liable, not only under the law, but in the minds of the people in the region. The reason the United States is in the crosshairs of everything bad in the Middle East is because of its role supporting abusive governments throughout the region.
 - Before we can address what the U.S. role and responsibility should be in the region, we have to recognize that the U.S. is doing far more to undermine democracy and rights in the region than to promote it. U.S. military support to abusive, undemocratic governments, whether as gifts to Israel and Egypt, or sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, coupled with U.S. political support and diplomatic protection directly contributes to these abuses.
 - Merely changing the cosmetic externalities of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, using tougher language from Biden but keeping the juicy arms deals behind the scenes, is not going to make any difference in the relationship.
 - This is not about ending our relationship with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel, or Egypt. It's about having normal country-to-country relationships with them: trade, investment, discussions, negotiations, education, culture that don't entail our aiding and abetting their horrible abuses.
 - The United States should stop committing its own abuses. This has to be the starting point of a foreign policy that is strategic, doesn't embroil us in conflicts, doesn't waste our resources, and doesn't completely undermine any ethical standing that we have globally.
 - There is no national strategic interest at stake in protecting the American public—in shielding the American public—from knowing the CIA's factfinding of Jamal Khashoggi murder.
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PANEL 2 –

THE PATH FORWARD: PRIORITIES AND POLICIES

Rob Berschinski

Senior Vice President, Policy, Human Rights First

- Between various congressional resolutions surrounding the war in Yemen, and on arms sales, and on concern around the Khashoggi murder, it's difficult to say that there's been a greater divergence between the legislative and executive branches on essentially any bilateral relationship over the course of the Trump administration.
- In many respects, the Khashoggi report requirements aren't just a good test case in terms of U.S.-Saudi relations, but also in terms of executive branch-legislative branch relations, where you've really seen overwhelming bipartisan opposition to the Trump administration. The Trump administration has just blown through a lot of these bipartisan

positions. So if I'm in Congress right now, irrespective of being a Republican or a Democrat, this is a means to claw back some of that ceded constitutional authority voted out of the legislative branch.

- In terms of the reporting requirements from last year's National Defense Authorization Act, what the Biden administration is going to be dealing with right off the bat is not just a legal requirement for transparency, but actually a legal requirement for actual action.
- We need to talk to the Saudis directly about the conditions on which arms transfers might resume. And the U.S. should just be vocal and forthright about what it seeks. That doesn't always mean public statements to the exclusion of private diplomacy, but it means laying out—whether you want to call it a roadmap or a menu—that balances individual cases surrounding the women's rights activists and other critics who are illegitimately detained, with the more systemic changes that the U.S. government would like to see.
- All of this needs to be undertaken with allies, given the very real deficit that we are in at this point in terms of U.S. credibility.
- We can walk and chew gum at the same time: the U.S. government can pursue its legitimate interests in other regards, whether it's with respect to trade or regional security, and so on, while saying this is where we draw a line, not exclusively, but particularly as relates to U.S. citizens.

Stephen McInerney

Executive Director, POMED

- Saudi Arabia has bought significantly more arms from the United States since 1950 than any other country in the world. And these purchases have accelerated quite dramatically in the past three and a half years since Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince.
- I don't know of any other country in the world where there is such a staggering disparity between the basic reality of the country, its government, and its system of government, and the narrative about that country and its government here in Washington.
- President-elect Biden said he will reassess the U.S. relationship. He said that he will treat them “like the pariah that they are.” We have to acknowledge, however, that the Biden administration itself will include political appointees who have worked for think tanks, universities, defense contractors, private companies, who are funded by or owned by Saudi Arabia. It will also include diplomats whose most lucrative career path may be to work for lobbying firms or other entities funded by Saudi Arabia when they retire, and they may understand that protecting the interests of the Saudi regime in its relationship with the U.S. could be essential to those career opportunities.
- On Capitol Hill, many members of Congress are deeply concerned with the state of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and many of them are currently fighting to change it, but they are consistently, though often quietly, obstructed by other members of Congress who receive large campaign contributions from lobbyists on behalf of the kingdom, which enormously complicates any efforts to change the relationship.

- Saudi Arabia, unlike many other dictatorships, does not really prevent its citizens from using the internet. It actually wants its citizens online, so they can be tracked and surveilled using their sophisticated technology.
- Despite the leading role of the U.S. tech industry globally, the U.S. government has really lagged behind other countries, including European states, in its efforts to address data protection and ensure that technology is not used to violate citizens' rights.
- It's important that the United States continues to support the development of technology to counter repression and to prevent the tools of repression from getting into the hands of the regime.

Annie Shiel

Senior Advisor for U.S. Policy and Advocacy, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)

- The sale of deadly destructive weapons is not a simple financial transaction for industry to win or lose. It is an act of foreign policy. If our foreign policy isn't working or if it's making the world less safe, then we need to stop and try something else.
 - It's a really common misconception that U.S. end-use monitoring programs are designed to monitor the way that weapons are actually used. But in fact, end-use monitoring agreements and programs are actually focused on preventing the unauthorized transfer of weapons to third parties and protecting U.S. technology. What end-use monitoring programs do not do is systematically monitor whether U.S. weapons are being used in the commission of human rights abuses, violations of international humanitarian law, or other acts of civilian harm.
 - In terms of economic arguments for continued arms sales, the U.S. already has an honestly egregious lead in global market share in the arms trade. And then on top of that, the top U.S. arms exporters earn most of their revenue—about 70 percent—from domestic U.S. government contracts, which are not affected by arms export policies.
 - And finally, my very favorite economic argument to debunk, which is that, despite the insistence of President Trump and weapons manufacturers, the arms industry contributes very little to job growth. For example, the arms industry employs just two tenths of one percent of the U.S. labor force and that number is likely actually even smaller as a result of things called co-production and offset agreements,
 - The other set of arguments says that if U.S. arms recipients turned to Russia and China for their arms, the U.S. will lose out on important political influence. But if recent history has shown us absolutely anything at all, it's that weapons are not an effective tool for buying influence.
 - Just because China and Russia want to sell arms to human rights abusers and fuel conflict doesn't mean we should join them in a race to the bottom and continue our complicity and undeniable harm.
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FIRESIDE CHAT – A VIEW FROM CAPITOL HILL

Matt Duss

Foreign Policy Advisor to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders

- What added to congressional concern about the devastating humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen was the way that the Trump administration had simply given the Saudis a blank check on pretty much everything.
- You can't ignore the role Mohammed bin Salman himself has played. There was a great deal of money spent on the public relations effort to roll him out as the new, exciting, innovative, revolutionary crown prince who is going to transform Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia's role in the region and the world. But it became very clear very quickly that this person was going to be a problem, not only with his crackdown on human rights activists and democracy activists inside Saudi Arabia but also the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the most brutal fashion imaginable. This caused more people to understand that we need to take a real close look and reassess the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the ways it is and is not advancing U.S. interests and values.
- We have seen—especially over the past 20 years of the global War on Terror—that Congress has allowed its authority to slowly be taken by presidents of both parties going back to George W. Bush.
- There is a bipartisan consensus to be built around these questions of constraining and restraining America's war-making authorities or looking more energetically and aggressively at where and when we choose to use force.
- The fact of the matter is, the American people simply do not support these long-term military interventions. What many in Washington believed to be a consensus around foreign policy—is not, in fact, a consensus among the American people.
- It is very interesting that now this is precisely how these normalization deals are being sold: as a way for Saudi Arabia to kind of skirt around taking responsibility for its own behavior and for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.
- Now, I think we should be modest about our ability to kind of magically create outcomes in other countries just by willing them into existence. But obviously, there's a lot of leverage the United States has with countries like Saudi Arabia, to whom we sell a lot of weapons and give a lot of political and diplomatic support. It should be a priority to make clear to the Saudis and others that they will not have the relationship that they want with the United States if they continue down their current path.
- There is sometimes less of an interest in pushing our concerns and holding a consistent line with regard to longtime partners and allies versus using human rights as a tool to bash adversaries.
- The Trump administration made the hypocrisy completely impossible to ignore, with Secretary Pompeo going to Saudi Arabia and sitting in Saudi Arabia and criticizing Iran's human rights record. It's valid to criticize Iran—Iran has serious problems with regard to human rights. But if you want to completely discredit what you're saying, then say it from Saudi Arabia.