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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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25.05.2020

Is the US-Saudi Alliance Headed Off a Cliff?



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

Can the US-Saudi alliance endure? Should it? World oil prices crashed in March during a price war between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and rival oil producer Russia. Disregarding the advice of his ministers, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (“MBS,” as he is known to friends and foes), the kingdom’s de facto ruler, turned the oil spigots on full blast. On April 20, the price of oil briefly plunged below \$0 a barrel for the first time in history.

The oil crash has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic which has brought industry to a standstill and kept people at home. The plummeting price of crude has been

a calamity for highly-leveraged US shale oil producers, several of which have been forced into bankruptcy.

On April 2, President Trump telephoned MBS with an ultimatum: decrease production or face oil tariffs. In classic “Good Cop, Bad Cop” fashion, Trump warned that he would be unable to prevent Congress from withdrawing US troops from Saudi Arabia if the kingdom did not cut production.

OPEC and Russia (the so-called “OPEC+” group) went into a huddle and on April 12 agreed to an unprecedented cut in oil production by 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) for May and June.” Reuters calls this “the biggest oil cut ever.”

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Saudi Arabia has fallen into line—for now—but has not been forgiven. On May 7, the Wall Street Journal reported that the US is removing two Patriot anti-missile batteries guarding Saudi oil fields. The US will also withdraw three hundred troops sent to operate the Patriots. Two US jet fighter squadrons have already left the Middle East. The Journal adds that the US “also will consider a reduction in the U.S. Navy presence in the Persian Gulf.” These moves put a halt, at least for the time being, to “a large-scale military buildup to counter Iran, according to U.S. officials.”^[11]

Trump has not said that these are moves to punish Saudi Arabia. Trump has remarked that the US shifts troops around all the time, a sentiment seconded by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Still, it is hard not to see US actions as punitive and as reflecting a deteriorating US-Saudi relationship. Hitherto, Trump and bin Salman enjoyed a fine bromance. It seemed that bin Salman could do no wrong in Trump’s eyes. Trump, who hates everything President Obama ever did, has continued Obama’s policy of providing active US assistance to the Saudi war on Yemen in which 100,000 civilians have died. Trump stuck by bin Salman even after Saudi agents murdered dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident, in their consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Trump stuck by the kingdom after a Saudi air force pilot trainee killed three Americans at a US naval air base in Florida on December 6, 2019. Later, in 2019, Trump issued an emergency declaration to ram through an \$8 billion arms sale to the Saudis and Emiratis which Congress was unlikely to approve.^[12]

Of course, in those incidents, the only thing lost was human lives. Now, MBS has at last done something serious: he's taken a bone saw to the profits of US oil companies. Trump has to see bin Salman's willingness to wreak hell in the US oil sector as base ingratitude. The reason the Patriots were deployed was in order to protect Saudi oil fields following the September 14, 2019 drone attacks on Saudi oil fields which knocked out 6% of world oil production. Yemen's Houthi rebels took credit for the attacks, but the US and Saudi Arabia blame Iran which supplies weapons and training to the Houthis.

Republican Rage

Trump wasn't kidding about Congress. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) called Saudi actions "economic warfare" and "a serious act of hostility," and those are not words you want to hear from a Texan. Cruz and other oil state Republican senators placed two calls in late March and on April 11 to the Saudi Energy Minister, Deputy Defense Minister, and Saudi Ambassador to the US. CNN quotes an unnamed source who said that "The anger from the senators was unlike anything I have heard from this group."

Cruz and the other Republicans demanded to know whether the Saudis' conduct was any way to treat friends? You can't blame them. They've been the Saudis' staunchest defenders in Congress. Now they were threatening to "rethink" the US-Saudi relationship, even to the extent of imposing economic sanctions.

Backing up words with action are two pending bills containing harsher measures than Trump has taken. A bill (S. 3687) introduced on April 9 by Republican Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, a major oil-producing state, would require Trump to remove US troops from Saudi Arabia 30 days after enactment. ALL US troops, not just 300. Cassidy's bill, which refers to "Saudi Arabia's aggression against the U.S. petroleum industry" in its title, would, in addition, impose a tariff to keep the price of Saudi oil above \$40 a barrel.

Reuters notes that Cassidy's bill "would not remove U.S. Patriot missiles or THAAD defense systems." But a bill introduced in March would. Trump is removing two Patriot anti-missile batteries, but two other batteries at Prince Sultan Air Base will be left in place. The deliciously named Strained Partnership Act (S. 3572), introduced by Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska and Senator Kevin Cramer of North Dakota, would remove all the Patriots plus the THADD defense system and would also force Trump to remove all US troops from Saudi Arabia within 90 days of enactment. Tariffs are not mentioned.

It is too bad that lawmakers aren't taking another stab at cutting off arms sales to the Saudis or terminating US assistance to bin Salman's war on Yemen.

In 1945, the US and Saudi Arabia entered into a devil's bargain: oil for US military protection. Today, the US is the world's largest producer of crude oil. Trump himself has tweeted that "We don't need Middle Eastern Oil & Gas." Particularly not when we urgently need to transition to renewable energy sources if human life is to continue on this planet. The US no longer needs to overlook the Saudi Royals' monstrous record on human rights, religious intolerance, sexism, and hatred of democracy. What still holds the alliance together? Arms sales have, but the plunge in oil prices may force the Saudis to buy fewer deadly toys. What's left is US and Saudi hatred of Iran. Can hatred keep the alliance together? A total break between the US and the Saudis will probably not occur, but a more arm's length relationship would be welcome.

Notes.

1) This does not mean that the US has made peace with Iran. On May 6, President Trump vetoed a resolution forbidding him from making war on Iran without Congressional authorization. On May 8, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told conservative radio host Ben Shapiro that removing the two batteries of Patriot missiles from Saudi Arabia was not "a recognition of a decreased threat [from Iran]." "It's not a decrease in our support to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," Pompeo continued, "and we're doing everything we can to provide security for them and air defense systems so the Iranians can't threaten them *

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2) State Department Inspector General Steve Linick was investigating Secretary Pompeo's role in the sale at the time President Trump fired him on May 15. This made Linick one of several inspector generals in different departments Trump has fired in recent weeks. ↑

CounterPunch 22.05.2020