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**How Support for Authoritarian Regimes Like Saudi Arabia has Undermined American  
Soft Power**

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**Abstract**

The controversial state of Saudi Arabia lies at the forefront of American foreign policy debate. This article examines how and why the United States supports a country that frequently abuses human rights, and how power is involved in that decision. The most frequent reasons used are that Saudi Arabia affords the United States economic hard power (i.e. the ability to coerce others) as a trading partner, and that it acts as a strategic counterbalance to Iranian influence in the Middle East. I find that while this is likely true, it also implicates the United States in almost every violation of human rights by Saudi Arabia. This has made the United States look unwilling or unable to live up to the ideals that make it attractive to others. In doing so, it has become less preferable, especially in the Middle East, to “be American”. This points to a decrease in the United States’ soft power, or its ability to persuade others into doing what it wants them to do.

## Introduction

On May 20, 2017, President Donald Trump and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud signed an agreement for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to immediately purchase \$110 billion worth of arms, plus an additional \$350 billion over the course of the next 10 years. Included in this exchange were combat ships, tanks, missile defense systems, and radar (Michael, et al, 2020). This arms deal is certainly the largest thus far between the two countries, but it is not the only one in recent history. The Obama administration similarly facilitated the transfer of \$115 billion of arms sales to the Kingdom between 2009-2016 (2020). Meanwhile, however, Saudi Arabia was committing (and continues to commit) a string of human rights abuses.

The strong economic and political relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, in spite of the latter's poor human rights record, highlights an important part of American foreign policy debate. United States purports values of freedom, democracy, and inalienable rights, making its high unconditional support of the Kingdom quite puzzling. This begs the question: why does the United States tolerate human rights abuses from authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia?

Statists and realists can offer a few perspectives to this question. Statists, while acknowledging that individual states cannot claim complete sovereignty over domestic human rights, posit that human rights ought not to be primarily dictated by an international system (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020). To statists, there is no legitimate international society that reserves the right to enforce laws and norms (2020). They argue that because the international enactment of human rights norms is (or should be) peripheral to other pursuits, human rights abuses in other states should not be a driving factor in American foreign policy (2020). Similarly, realists like

George Kennan have argued that a state's main interests are in "its military security, the integrity of its political life and the well-being of its people" (Kennan, 1986). Following this line of amoral policymaking, Saudi Arabia is enough of a strategic economic interest that the United States does not need to worry itself with the domestic human rights affairs of Saudi Arabia, nor does it need to worry about the impact the United States-Saudi Arabia alliance might have on its reputation with other states (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020).

Liberal advocates of international human rights, especially those that ascribe to the cosmopolitan model, see the issue differently. Liberal human rights advocates argue that the world is not only host to an international system, but an international society. This global society, comprised of individuals, states, and NGOs, ostensibly reserves the right (and perhaps an obligation) to enforce international laws and norms pertaining to human rights (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020). They argue that the guarantee of human rights is essential to peace and stability; the primary focus (of cosmopolitanism especially) therefore is on individuals, not only states. As such, they ultimately deem it a responsibility of the international society to intervene in cases of human rights abuse (2020). They especially differ from the realist perspective here in that they discourage the notion of amoral foreign policy decision-making (2020).

I argue that, through support for authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, American soft power has gradually eroded – especially in the Middle East. The intangible counterpart to GDP and military strength (i.e. hard power), soft power is best described as "when one country gets other countries to *want* what it wants" (Nye, 1990). A nation's soft power largely derives from the influence of its culture, ideology, and institutions (1990). The United States has been able to exert a great deal of influence through its purported values; liberty, liberal democratic values, and human rights promotion make the United States an especially attractive concept to foreign

cultures (1990). Despite this, the United States has decided to turn a blind eye to blatant human rights abuses by regimes like the Kingdom, which has made the United States lose some credibility by association. Pursuing this amoral realist foreign policy in hopes of attaining more power has, somewhat ironically, diminished it instead.

This article begins with a brief overview about hard and soft power. This involves examining how human rights relate to American soft power and the limitations of trying to measure power. Next, we briefly examine the history of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. This segues into how relationships with authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia have eroded American soft power, especially in the Middle East. This article closes with implications and recommendations for the future of American soft power and its relationship with Saudi Arabia.

### **Part I: Difficulties of Measuring Power**

Hard power is power that is derived from materials, and allows for states to coerce, bully, and/or force others into doing what they want (Walker). Military spending and economic strength are perhaps the most familiar forms of hard power. The United States has a larger military budget than the next ten nations combined (SIPRI, 2020). It has the highest total GDP in the world (Trading Economics, 2019). It stands at the forefront of numerous alliances and international organizations, and it supplements all of this with its considerable nuclear arsenal. Simply put, it is quite successful in this regard. There is no dispute that agreements like the 2017 arms deal with Saudi Arabia have greatly contributed to the expansion of hard power (Michael, et al, 2020).

As already mentioned, soft power differs from hard power in that it is considerably more abstract. A nation's soft power largely derives from the attraction of its culture, ideology, and institutions (Nye, 1990). If hard power wins fights, then soft power wins hearts. In the American context, much of its soft power is derived from the attractiveness of what it means to "be American". Liberty, opportunity, and human rights are all enticing ideals. As such, when nations are properly seduced by American soft power, they will more or less choose to emulate American interests by their own volition. When people in a given region grow to dislike the concept of being American because, say, the United States contributed to local human rights abuses, then they are less likely to do things that parallel American interests. This has been described as a "kiss of death" (Nye, 2004).

Soft and hard power both refer to potentialities, and so it is necessary to understand the importance of actually putting them into action. Successfully getting another state to do something via power, also known as the actualization of power, is where one of the key differences between hard and soft power shines (Walker). That difference is cost. Hard power affords states a few different options to exact change: they can bribe other states, threaten them with sanctions, threaten violence, and actually commit to brute force (Walker). Each one of those options can be quite costly. Soft power, on the other hand, persuades the other state to make that change themselves. It is because of this that soft power is almost always the least costly form of power (Walker). A prime example of successful soft power actualization is the Marshall Plan. Presented as a humanitarian document to restore war-torn Europe, this plan sent large sums of money to the states in Western Europe. This pushed those states into rejecting communism, accepting liberal democracy, and creating a powerful American ally in the EU (Ivanova, 2008).

A limitation that must be considered when discussing this topic, however, is that it is difficult to actually measure power. Hard power can arguably be determined by taking into account total GDP and defense spending, but that does not necessarily give you a numerical “power level”. Likewise, soft power cannot simply be “solved” through an arithmetic of “good” actions and “bad” actions (Nye, 2010). The Soft Power 30 attempts to measure soft power composite scores of individual countries with six different metrics: digital, culture, enterprise, engagement, education, and government. The United States is virtually unrivaled in the digital, education, and culture sections (The Soft Power 30, 2019). A section where American soft power does not rank quite so high is in the “government” section. The Soft Power 30 (2019) uses this metric to “assess a state’s political values, public institutions, and major public policy outcomes”. Factors taken into consideration include government effectiveness, human development, individual freedoms, and human rights (2019). As of 2019, the United States ranked 21st in government soft power, dropping from 16<sup>th</sup> place in 2016 (2019). This drop resulted in the United States having a record low cumulative ranking of 5th place (2019). These rankings are believable, considering the United States is host to a myriad of powerful tech companies, top tier universities, far-reaching cultural norms, and a rather controversial government (2019). Something to note, however, is that the reports of diminished soft power correlate with the election of former president Donald Trump (2019). The Trump administration frequently espoused mercantilist policies under the slogan of “America First”, with the goal of supposedly doing what was in America’s national interest. Steps taken included prioritizing bilateral trade deals, such the arms deal with Saudi Arabia in 2017, over multilateral agreements (2019). This drop in soft power rating obviously cannot be attributed solely to American relations with authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, nor can they even be solely attributed to



foreign policy. Therein lies a problem with trying to assess changes in power. We cannot solely rely on these rankings to pinpoint how Saudi Arabia has affected American soft power, and so we must use predetermined indicators of soft power decline instead.

## **Part II: How Authoritarian Regimes like Saudi Arabia Have Undermined the United States' Soft Power**

While the nebulosity of precisely measuring power has already been explained, that does not mean this puzzle is unsolvable. Joseph Nye (2018) notes that a state's soft power can decline in three ways: when its culture is no longer attractive, when it does not live up to its political values (democracy and human rights), and when its policies fail to lack legitimacy, humility, and "awareness of others interests" (Nye, 2018). Iraq is a good example of this formula. Iraq as a whole became "Anti-American" after the United States invaded the country under faulty pretenses, inflicted severe collateral damage, and failed to establish any form of democracy (2004). In order to see how authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia have likely eroded American soft power, we must find examples of how its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have similarly facilitated any of the three aforementioned ways to reduce soft power.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have always shared an odd relationship. Though the two nations are allies, their systems of government are almost completely antithetical. The United States purports to be a representative democracy that separates church and state and guarantees its citizens basic human rights. Saudi Arabia is an autocratic, monarchical theocracy. It is easy to assume, then, that this long-lasting partnership has not been out of mutual admiration

for the other's system of government. Supporting Israel and making an enemy of Iran (among other transgressions) have left the United States with few allies in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia seems to be one of few exceptions. Abundant oil certainly makes it a formidable trading partner, and therefore a considerable source of hard power. Saudi demographics are perhaps just as important, too. Being a Sunni majority, the United States-Saudi alliance is in the mutual interests of both states that wish to counterbalance Shia Iran (Michael, et al, 2020). Simply put, the United States-Saudi alliance is one of economic, political, and strategic convenience. This makes for a formidable source of hard power, but unfortunately contradicts American political values of democracy. Unfortunately, this convenience has allowed for American leaders to ignore some of the blatant abuses of human rights within Saudi Arabia's own borders.

Saudi officials have often and repeatedly repressed free speech both online and offline. Activists, such as those voicing support for women's rights, are arbitrarily arrested and held in detention without charge or trial (Amnesty International, 2019). Capital punishment is issued in court proceedings that do not abide by international standards of a fair trial; defendants are often not afforded any form of legal assistance, and others have claimed that they were tortured into confessions (2019). A disproportionate amount of the people sentenced to capital punishment are of the Shi'ite minority (2019). Women are also treated as second-class citizens. It was not very long ago that the law allowed for the arrest of a young woman for driving (Milanovic, 2020). Additionally, while Saudi women no longer require a guardian to travel, they still need a guardian's approval to get married (Amnesty International, 2019). In this regard, the United States has failed to honor the 6th, 8th, and 14th Amendments of its own Constitution by tolerating unfair trials, cruel and unusual punishment, and negligence of due process.

While the Kingdom has certainly made a habit of violating the human rights of its citizens, it is perhaps the death of one man that has incited the most worldwide criticism. A Saudi Arabian Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi, was assassinated and dismembered in 2018 while visiting the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (Milanovic, 2020). Saudi officials outright denied reports of Khashoggi's death, claiming that he had left the consulate. Riyadh maintained this façade until overwhelming evidence (including an audio tape) forced it into acknowledging that the journalist had, in fact, died (2020). While the Saudi administration still denies any connection between the killing and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, American intelligence agencies nonetheless agree that the murder of Khashoggi was premeditated and, more than likely, ordered by the crown prince himself (2020). As a journalist, Khashoggi was obviously a proponent of free speech and the press. He was outspoken about his belief in women's rights, and frequently criticized the Saudi regime; he notably voiced his support for Loujain al-Hathloul, the young woman who was arrested for violating a law that barred women from driving (2020). At this point, determining whether or not the crown prince is truly guilty is ultimately irrelevant. What matters is that most of the world believes that he and his administration were involved in the murder of a journalist. This has had a major impact on worldwide perception of the Saudi Arabian regime. The cumulative damage to the Kingdom's reputation has crudely been described by a Saudi official as being "10 times worse than 9/11" (Usher, 2019). American officials have denounced this event and condemned the Saudi regime, but little was done beyond that. This muted response, broadcasted to the entire international system, ultimately shows a failure of the United States to effectively protect one of its most fundamental (and perhaps most attractive) values – freedom of speech.

Unfortunately, Khashoggi is not the only casualty that the United States has elected to ignore in favor of its strategic partner in the Arabian Peninsula. In 2014, Shia rebels in Yemen, known as the Houthis, captured the capital city of Sana'a. The Houthis made a number of demands, such as lower gas prices and the formation of a new government (Michael, et al, 2020). When the Sunni leadership refused to meet this demand, the rebels captured the presidential palace and deposed President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his administration in 2015. President Hadi sought asylum in Saudi Arabia, which, along with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Pakistan, and Egypt, began a military offensive to stop the Houthi advance in Yemen (2020). The Saudis have been ruthless in their assault. No target has been spared; warehouses, factories, water supplies, power plants, cultural centers, and even hospitals were bombed (Cockburn, 2016). Thousands of civilians were killed or wounded, and Saudi Arabia ensured there would be no reprieve by blockading the country from all food, fuel, and medicine (2016). By 2017, humanitarian organizations had determined that upwards of 17.8 million people in Yemen had insufficient food and water as a result of the Saudi blockade (World Peace Foundation, 2017). Many of the weapons used by the Saudis during the onset of this crisis were supplied the \$115 billion arms deal with the Obama administration (Michael, et al, 2020). The United States also saw the defeat of the Shia Houthis as a way to further counteract Iranian influence, and so it even provided Saudi warplanes with fuel (2020). Members of the Obama administration recognized that this as a risk to credibility because it implicated the United States as being complicit to Saudi Arabian war crimes (2020). Any chance of de-escalation was quashed when the Donald Trump took office and agreed to sell Saudi Arabia even more weapons and technology in 2017 (2020). By doing this, the United States willingly solidified itself as a co-belligerent in one of the worst humanitarian disasters in

recent history (2020). The United States not only failed to live up to its value of protecting human rights, it took part in ensuring their degradation in the Middle East.

Any drops in American soft power within recent years obviously cannot be solely attributed to these specific events, nor specifically to the United States' support for Saudi Arabia. The important takeaway is that tolerance of blatant human rights abuses like these are part and parcel to the amoral foreign policy approach of the past several years. As much economic and military power an authoritarian regime like Saudi Arabia may offer, its tendency to abuse human rights comes with the cost of making the United States more unattractive by association. It is safe to assume that the United States' tolerance of, and even its participation in, human rights abuses by authoritarian regimes has furthered the development of what has been referred to as "Anti-Americanism" in the Middle East (Nye, 2004). As the name might suggest, this is not conducive to stability of American soft power.

### **Implications and Recommendations for the Future**

This leaves us with the question of what lies ahead for the United States. The new Biden administration already seems significantly less tolerant of the Saudi regime. Biden claimed in his presidential campaign that, in light of Riyadh's numerous human rights abuses, the United States would be "reassessing" its relationship with Saudi Arabia (Guzansky & Shavit, 2020). Biden made good on this statement in February of 2021, when he put the remainder of the 2017 arms deal on indefinite hold (Emmons, 2021). At the very least, this puts an end to what could be considered the United States' active participation in the (still ongoing) Yemen crisis. American leaders should keep in mind, however, that they will continue to be implicated in any future

human rights abuses by their authoritarian allies that remain unchallenged. This is where the inherent volatility of the United States becomes problematic. Even if the current administration makes the necessary changes to reverse any residual damage to American soft power, a future statist or realist administration in four or eight years could very easily throw away any progress in his or her own foreign policy pursuits.

Moving forward, the United States will have to evaluate what it wishes to accomplish in the Middle East. It could very easily continue to look the other way as the blatant human rights violations of Saudi Arabia continue to damage its reputation in the Middle East and abroad. The enormous economic and strategic benefits that the oil state offers are understandably quite tempting. However, I believe there is a much preferable alternative. Guzansky and Shavit note that, with the new administration, Saudi Arabia will have to work harder to prove its continued usefulness to the United States (2020). While the Biden administration would be remiss to cut ties with Saudi Arabia, this does provide an opportunity to make change. The Kingdom is a reliable source of hard power, but there is no reason that has to always be at the cost of soft power. The United States is certainly not limited in its options here. It can persuade, bribe, or even threaten Saudi Arabia into taking human rights more seriously. After all, what good is the United States' power if it cannot be actualized?

### **Conclusion**

United States support for authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia has eroded its soft power, especially in the Middle East. The alliance between the democratic United States and the authoritarian Saudi Arabia is puzzling, but those ascribing to statist and realist beliefs have justified it as a way to secure hard power. This has made the United States complicit, and at

times even a co-belligerent, in Saudi Arabian human rights violations. While it is considerably difficult to actually measure changes in power, the United States has tolerated Saudi Arabian's antithetical system of government, its repression of women and minorities, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Furthermore, it continued to sell arms to the Saudis despite their involvement in the Yemen crisis. These are all cases in which the United States has failed to live up to its ostensible political values of democracy and human rights, making it less attractive. Naturally, being less attractive makes it more difficult to persuade others, suggesting the United States soft power has been damaged. As such, in pursuing amoral realist policy with authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, the United States has ironically whittled away an important concept of realism – power (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020).

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