

Rubio's "Full Gangster" Comments Hinder U.S.-Saudi Relations

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It didn't take long for Florida Senator Marco Rubio's comments that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had "[gone full gangster](#)" to make the news rounds all the way from the U.S. to the Middle East, across the globe and back again. The Republican senator made his controversial comments during Retired Gen. John Abizaid's nomination hearing Wednesday in Washington to be the Trump administration's first ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Despite increasing tensions between the two long-time allies, the U.S. has not had an ambassador to Saudi Arabia since Trump became president in January 2017. Abizaid is a retired four-star Army general who led U.S. Central Command during the Iraq war under the Bush and Obama administrations.

During the hearing, both Republican and Democrats pressed Abizaid over what they said were Saudi domestic repression, including lashings, electrocutions, beatings, whippings, sexual abuse, raids, the alleged detention and torture of activists and royal family members, the likely killing of Saudi dissident journalist, and U.S. resident, Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey last October, as well as the recent alleged torture of a U.S. citizen.

Ruthless and reckless

Republican Sen. Jim Risch, the committee chairman, joined in, stating that "Saudi Arabia has engaged in acts that are simply not acceptable." Another Republican, Sen. Ron Johnson reiterated Rubio's "full gangster" remarks. Rubio added that

"He [bin Salman] is reckless, he's ruthless, he has a penchant for escalation, for taking high risks, confrontational in his foreign policy approach and I think increasingly willing to test the limits of what he can get away with the United States."

Senators also condemned Saudi Arabia's conduct in the ongoing war in Yemen, which the Crown Prince has been instrumental in. Abizaid, for his part, paid his part skillfully, which should help ease concerns among senators whether he is fit or not for the high-profile diplomatic post. Though defending the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia as strategically important, he also called for accountability for the murder of Khashoggi, and support for human rights.

"In the long run, we need a strong and mature partnership with Saudi Arabia," [Abizaid told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#). "It is in our interests to make sure that the relationship is sound."

Part of the unbridled criticism over recent alleged Saudi misbehavior comes from frustrated American lawmakers that want to see the Trump administration take a harder line over Saudi Arabia, while both the House and Senate have passed resolutions to that would end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. However, Trump has resisted such resolutions. Abizaid said that continued U.S. support “bolsters the self-defense capabilities of our partners and reduces the risk of harm to civilians.”

Significant take-aways

At the end of the day, several issues have to be examined. First, though lawmakers have the right to make such assertions at the hearing, the actions of Saudi Arabia are still the actions of a sovereign power beyond the scope of U.S. control. A comparison could even be made over human rights abuse claims, torture and other disconcerting claims in China, particularly in Tibet, where hundreds of thousands of citizens, mostly men, are detained for extended periods of time and endure what Beijing calls re-education. Yet, the U.S. relationship with China operates under different imperatives than the U.S.-Saudi relationship, so pressure over these alleged abuses isn't being promulgated on the same scale.

The second take away from remarks made at Wednesday's hearing centers on what can be called reality-geopolitics. The more than 70-year alliance between Washington and Riyadh that has survived World War II, being on the same side against Soviet expansion during the Cold War, surviving the fallout from both the 1967 and 1973 Arab oil embargo, managing Saudi angst at continued U.S. support of Israel, as well as now working together trying to reign in Iranian regional hegemony and support of terrorism – this fragile alliance has to be viewed through a different lens than other alliances.

Economic necessity

The U.S.-Saudi alliance is one born of necessity, mostly economic (global oil markets) as well as one of wrestling with middle eastern security. The two nations don't share common values, like the U.S. does with the U.K. or with much of Western Europe, doesn't share a similar history, whose values are derived from extremely a different religious history and perspective. The U.S. is the largest democracy in the world, while Saudi Arabia is a top-down authoritarian monarchy influenced in large part by its strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

Just the fact that two radically different nations can exist as allies for so long has to appreciate. Nonetheless, Senator Bob Menendez, the committee's ranking Democrat, acknowledged the strategic importance of Saudi ties, amid threats from Iran. “But we cannot let these interests blind us to our values or to our long-term interests in stability,” he added.

However, another point to consider is growing U.S. energy independence, particularly as the country recently passed the 12 million barrels per day oil production mark, with that production amount projected to increase going forward to next year and beyond. Though U.S. crude is mostly light, sweet as opposed to heavier, sour crude mostly produced and imported from Saudi Arabia by U.S. refineries, growing U.S. global market share, reduced Saudi oil imports, could indeed lead to fracturing on the U.S.-Saudi alliance. It's oil first and middle eastern security second, which often goes hand in hand, that is the glue that keeps this fragile alliance from falling apart.

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