

Saudi Arabia: The ally from hell

MbS has made the U.S. complicit in war crimes and committed murder. The new administration should stand up to him.

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Members of the G-20, representing states with the world's largest economies, gathered virtually over the weekend for a meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia. Time is running out for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to capitalize on his friendship with President Donald Trump. The incoming administration is unlikely to cater to his deadly whims.

Trump made his first presidential trip abroad to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The president came away from that meeting in thrall to the young MbS, who turned a repressive collective dictatorship into a murderous personal tyranny.

If the Trump administration had merely maintained civil relations with yet another authoritarian regime, there would have been little controversy. However, the president and secretary of state turned complicity with brutality into an art form. Rarely has a president so ostentatiously welcomed such a dictator to the White House, assiduously protected such a dictator from accountability, and effectively armed such a dictator to commit further villainy.

The KSA was always a dubious partner for America. An absolute monarchy in which fear of Islamist radicalism caused the princely libertines in private to enforce Islamic purity in public, Riyadh won the affection of U.S. officials with its vast oil reserves. Western governments averted their gaze from royal repression and welcomed spendthrift princes and princesses seeking a luxurious and sybaritic retreat.

However, after King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud took over in January 2015, he broke with tradition and put one of his sons, the current crown prince, in charge. Then MbS staged a uniquely Saudi *machtübernahme*, akin to the Nazi seizure of power. Since then, even senior royals have routinely disappeared from view—kidnappings, detentions, torture, shakedowns, and killings have stamped the regime's authority on the country.

The grotesque nadir of misconduct occurred two years ago when MbS's minions turned the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, into an abattoir where they murdered and dismembered Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist and critic living in America. Most governments around the world recoiled, but not the Trump administration.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo continued his servile behavior, holding friendly photo-ops in Riyadh and abusing legal rules to ensure the continuing sales of arms used to slaughter Yemeni civilians. His final kowtow to MbS is expected to be the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group, a known falsehood intended to help revive the Saudis' losing campaign in Yemen. The president's embrace of the royals was even tighter. Of MbS, he proudly proclaimed to Bob

Woodward, “I saved his ass.” Imagine Neville Chamberlain returning to London from the 1938 Munich conference, declaring that he had saved Adolf Hitler’s ass.

So bad is the Kingdom’s reputation among other governments that it was the only candidate nation denied membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council in the latest round of voting. The KSA trailed everyone else, including Nepal, which lacked Riyadh’s money, oil, and clout. The crown prince’s ostentatious slice and dice operation on Khashoggi was too much even for fellow dictators to stomach.

Of course, the administration knows the truth. Despite its whitewashing of Saudi crimes, the State Department’s own human rights report points to

unlawful killings; executions for nonviolent offenses; forced disappearances; torture of prisoners and detainees by government agents; arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy; criminalization of libel, censorship, and site blocking; restrictions on freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and movement; severe restrictions of religious freedom; citizens’ lack of ability and legal means to choose their government through free and fair elections; trafficking in persons; violence and official discrimination against women, although new women’s rights initiatives were implemented; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity; and prohibition of trade unions. In several cases the government did not punish officials accused of committing human rights abuses, contributing to an environment of impunity.

Nothing changed with the approach of the G-20 meeting, despite pressure on Riyadh to at least release women who had been arrested for advocating social reform. After all, in advance of the full gathering, Riyadh sponsored a business meeting that placed a “special emphasis” on “creating a more equitable future for women in the business world.” But no one was freed. At least women now have an equal opportunity to be wrongfully jailed.

Indeed, reported the *Financial Times*, “Waves of crackdowns have continued. Hundreds of activists remain in prison, according to human rights groups. One veteran activist died in custody this year and another writer died shortly after he was released.” Although the KSA always has been repressive, one Saudi activist living in the West observed that torture is “now a regular part of imprisonment” and “retroactive arrests are made for things now deemed unacceptable.” There is no safe harbor: you “no longer know the red lines, that you once could navigate around.”

Rather than adopt reforms, the regime responds with carefully crafted lies and misdirection. Particularly disingenuous was a recent talk by the Kingdom’s ambassador to America, Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. In flawless English, she dismissed those who “still cling to outdated, outmoded completely obsolete views of the Kingdom” and argued that for human rights, “progress is not a straight line but curved, and that what matters most is that the end of the curve is towards equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion in line with our values, culture, and tradition.” Unmentioned was the most fundamental issue—liberty, and the political repression that has become almost total under MbS.

The crown prince’s crimes are not only internal. He took a reliable and cautious gerontocracy and turned it into a reckless and wanton aggressor. Ironically, Saudi Arabia has become more dangerous than Iran, on which the Trump administration has foolishly fixated.

The crown prince's greatest crime is the war in Yemen. Yemen started as two separate states and has been in conflict for decades, with Saudi Arabia frequently interfering—deploying troops early in Yemen's history and later spreading Wahhabism to radicalize the population. When the latest round of factional fighting ousted Yemen's pliant ruler, Riyadh invaded, viewing war as a small price to pay to reinstall a puppet regime.

The result has been five years of horror, as Saudi pilots proved better at bombing weddings, funerals, markets, school buses, and apartments than combatants. To rehabilitate its reputation, Riyadh then provided aid to counteract the damage. Contrary to Saudi claims, the Houthi militia never was controlled by Iran, which counseled against the seizure of Sanaa, Yemen's capital. However, Saudi overreach provided Tehran with an irresistible opportunity to bleed the royals.

As a result of Riyadh's own folly, what was to be a five-week campaign turned into a five-year-and-counting war. The Saudis today whine about "cowardly" Houthi missile attacks after committing murder and mayhem in Yemen. Notably, when Ambassador Reema denounced missiles being fired into Saudi Arabia, she admitted that they started in 2016—the year after the KSA began bombing civilians in Yemen. Of course, the Houthis also should not target civilians. But the royals should have thought of that before wantonly invading their neighbor.

Unfortunately, both the Obama and Trump administrations backed Riyadh's invasion—selling, servicing, and for a time refueling warplanes, as well as resupplying munitions and providing intelligence—which has made Americans complicit in Saudi war crimes. Indeed, Yemenis accurately call the conflict the Saudi American War. Americans should not be surprised if revenge-minded Yemeni terrorists one day strike back.

Alas, this was not Riyadh's only effort to spread tyranny abroad. The Saudis used troops to sustain the dictatorial Sunni monarchy in Bahrain against pro-democracy protests by the Shia majority—naturally blamed on Iran by royal regimes as ruthless as that in Tehran. The KSA funded jihadist insurgents in Syria, whose activities encouraged religious minorities and many Sunnis to rally around President Bashar al-Assad. Today, Riyadh is similarly involved in Libya's civil war. Three years ago, MbS detained Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri on a state visit and forced the latter to announce his resignation, which Hariri reversed when released under international pressure. That was shortly after the Kingdom blockaded Qatar, with an invasion to follow, which was thwarted only by U.S. pressure on Riyadh and Turkish military support for Doha.

All told, Saudi Arabia is the ally from hell, its rulers brutal but incompetent, murderous but reckless, and ever craving support while exuding arrogance. President Joe Biden appears to know what must be done. More than three decades ago, he criticized "the mythical notion that the Saudis, even if they were so predisposed, are able to be agents of change and able to be agents of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf region." Last year he declared, "We will make clear that America will never again check its principles at the door just to buy oil or sell weapons." He also pledged that "Jamal's death will not be in vain."

Most importantly, Washington should end U.S. support for the war in Yemen. It should also halt Riyadh's attempt to otherwise drag America into a Shia-Sunni battle and oppose MbS's reach for regional hegemony. Indeed, the new administration should make the crown prince's official life as difficult as possible. The message should be clear: either MbS changes his behavior or the Kingdom changes its ruler. The incoming Biden administration obviously should not intervene

directly in Saudi politics, but it should make clear that there will be no more business as usual with a criminal regime.

Of course, such a stance might create hysteria inside the Washington beltway as well as in Riyadh. Prince Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a former Saudi ambassador to the U.S., warned, "I hope that members of your legislative chambers will not take precipitous action that will do harm to this relationship." However, it is Riyadh's gross misconduct, especially under the crown prince, that has done the harm. It is the obligation of the U.S. government, executive as well as legislative, to recognize and respond to this ugly reality.

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