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## Joe Biden's Next Big Mistake: Selling Out America To Saudi Arabia?

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August 1, 2023

Benjamin Netanyahu is in trouble at home, but columnist Thomas Friedman reports that the Biden administration might come to the Israeli prime minister's rescue. The U.S. president is pressing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to formally recognize Israel.

There should be no harm in that. But the kingdom's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, whom Biden once promised to treat as a pariah, wants a bribe — and a big one. Related Friedman: “The president is wrestling with whether to pursue the possibility of a U.S.-Saudi mutual security pact that would involve Saudi Arabia normalizing relations with Israel, provided that Israel make concessions to the Palestinians that would preserve the possibility of a two-state solution.”

It is important to translate Friedman's description into plain terms. Set aside any notion that such an agreement would be mutual. After all, Saudi Arabia lost its war with Yemen, the poorest nation in the region, and the Kingdom has little in military terms to offer the U.S. Rather, the Kingdom's princely rulers hire out all the tough work to foreigners. Washington is offering to extend a one-way military guarantee that would turn American military personnel into royal bodyguards, risking their lives to protect a rapacious class dedicated to little beyond its own survival. The very idea is grotesque.

Protecting Saudi Arabia, and especially doing so in order to convince it to recognize Israel, does not come close to qualifying as a vital national interest. To start with, the region matters far less than it once did, with oil production expanding around the globe. Nor is any competing hegemon threatening to conquer the territory and deny its resources to others. China is playing a larger economic role in the region, but that is inevitable. Indeed, the U.S. faces similar competition worldwide. Washington should make it clear that if Beijing wants to take over the royal family's protection (it doesn't), it may do so.

Israel has become a regional military superpower, capable of defending itself. Moreover, whatever the rhetorical missiles flying between it and Saudi Arabia, they have always been at peace. Indeed, the two governments have long quietly cooperated in security matters. Official recognition is mostly designed to enhance Israel's diplomatic credibility and expand its economic opportunities. However beneficial those factors might be, they would accrue to Israel rather than America, so the former should pay whatever concessions might be required.

A big problem for Netanyahu is his government's sustained mistreatment of the Palestinians. Although this bothers Arab governments less than it does the "Arab street," even a dictator like MbS must pay some deference to popular opinion. Further, his ailing father, who remains king, apparently feels strongly on the issue. (Indeed, Jerusalem's recent treatment of Palestinians has caused even those Arab nations that have recognized Israel to cool on the relationship.)

There is no obvious way for Netanyahu to simultaneously improve the status of Palestinians and preserve his far-right governing coalition, and without the latter, he probably cannot stay in power and out of jail. So he is desperate for the Biden administration to bail him out by having the American people pay Riyadh's price.

The U.S. should move in the opposite direction. Despite all the high-minded hand-holding and kissing by presidents and kings, the KSA has become a net negative for the U.S. National Review's Mark Wright was appropriately brutal in his assessment:

"America's implicit security guarantees of the Saudi monarchy have brought us little but grief for 40 years. During every one of those years, the Saudi dictatorship has played us fast and loose. It has never been aligned with our values or our interests. It has tolerated and indirectly funded our radical-jihadist enemies to shore itself up domestically. It has brutalized and terrorized its people, especially its women and religious minorities. It has used its oil reserves as a weapon against us and has participated in and led a cartel that has placed the United States under an oil embargo, causing tremendous economic damage."

Alas, Riyadh's behavior keeps getting worse: It invades Yemen, kidnaps the Lebanese prime minister, uses troops to help Bahrain's minority-Sunni monarchy crush the democratic aspirations of the Shiite majority, underwrites jihadist insurgents in Syria, and attempts regime change in Qatar. Last summer MbS ostentatiously humiliated Biden after the U.S. president flew in to beg for increased oil production, and the regime famously used Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate as a human abattoir in which to murder and dismember journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The slaughter in Yemen has been Bin Salman's greatest atrocity. While the Saudi royals are not the only guilty party — the United Arab Emirates was initially an equal partner in crime, and the opposition Houthi insurgents are no friends of liberty — the Saudi crown prince deserves most of the blame for turning a domestic conflict into an international proxy war. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have died in the conflict, with U.S. officials de facto conspirators in Saudi war crimes. Is helping Riyadh kill so promiscuously what the Biden administration meant when it insisted that human rights would be at the center of its foreign policy?

Indeed, the Kingdom is more repressive than Russia, Iran, and China, making Riyadh the automatic counterpoint to sanctimonious Washington lectures about democracy. Freedom House describes the brutal tyranny: "Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime relies on pervasive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power. Women and members of religious minority groups face extensive discrimination in law and in practice. Working conditions for the large expatriate labor force are often exploitative."

It is one thing to have a normal diplomatic relationship with such a government, one marked by beneficial economic dealings, and security cooperation when strictly necessary. It is quite another thing to treat the Saudi regime as an esteemed partner owed great respect and costly protection. The president should remind National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and National Security Council staffer Brett McGurk, who were recently in Riyadh for talks, that they are supposed to represent the American people, not the Saudi royals.

President Biden should stop trying to buy Saudi recognition of Israel. Senators on both sides of the aisle should make clear they will not ratify a defense treaty between America and Saudi Arabia. House members should declare that they will not fund any presidential promises, whether of arms transfers or U.S. deployments to the Kingdom. And the American people should tell their leaders that Saudi Arabia is not worth a war.

The status of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is up to those governments, not Washington. Their peoples, not Americans, should pay the costs of such an agreement. Most important, the U.S. military's principal role is the defense of this nation, not the Middle East's worst combination of absolute monarchy and brutal tyranny.

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