

Joe Biden Grovels to the Saudis

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It was the fist-bump from hell. On arrival to the Jeddah meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council, President Joe Biden greeted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with the slightly unorthodox alternative to a handshake.

Although less offensive than a ceremonial kiss, the presidential greeting legitimized someone once slated to be a “pariah” and possessing a capacity for ruthlessness, brutality, and treachery matching that of the world’s worst dictators. Indeed, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a liberty bottom-dweller, settled among the ten least free societies in Freedom House’s rankings.

The president continued to embarrass himself. Aware of voluminous criticism of his visit, he insisted that he expressed his disappointment over the murder and dismemberment of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi to the crown prince, who naturally denied everything. (At least, that is what Biden claimed. A top Saudi official claimed the exchange never took place.) And then the meeting proceeded as planned.

Biden did promise to bring up the issue again. According to the administration’s official Fact Sheet, “The United States will continue to engage in a regular and direct dialogue with Saudi Arabia and other partners on these important issues, and raise our concerns with human rights at every opportunity.” Far from making the regime pay a price for its society-wide crackdown on even the slightest hint of dissent, this indicates that the president is all talk.

That would be bad enough if the only victims of Saudi repression were Saudi citizens, like Khashoggi. According to the Freedom Initiative, however, “the widespread and systematic campaign of arrest, intimidation, defamation, imprisonment, torture, threats, and abuse are a global experience.” Indeed, Americans are among the victims. Added TFI, “At least eighty-nine US persons or their family members were detained, disappeared, or under travel bans at some point in 2021 in Saudi Arabia.”

The issue is pure politics. The man tapped to be the kingdom’s next king, Crown Prince “Slice ‘n Dice,” does not like to be criticized. The Freedom Initiative noted that

In all but one case involving alleged ‘corruption,’ terrorism charges in Saudi Arabian courts against US persons have been issued in relation to social media statements in support of groups or individuals internationally recognized as civil society or human rights groups or their members (most prevalent are [the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association] of which the late Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid was a co-founder) or, for tweets or communication with individuals who have criticized the government. Sometimes, ‘criticism’ of government can be as simple as a complaint about the rise in taxes or high unemployment rates in Saudi Arabia. Other terrorist

charges in Saudi courts against US citizens relate to obtaining US citizenship without permission from the Saudi government, sending money overseas, supporting protests, or communicating with peaceful dissidents deemed 'hostile' to the Saudi government due to public criticisms of their human rights record or policy.

Apparently, Biden did not mention any of these Americans. But, he insisted, he would get tough if the crown prince, known as MbS, acted up again. The president hadn't even gotten home before news broke that the United Arab Emirates, headed by Sheik Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, an MbS confidante, had detained U.S. citizen Asim Ghafoor. The latter, Khashoggi's attorney, was arrested on a supposed conviction in absentia, previously unknown, for money laundering. How convenient.

So what did Biden get for his submissive performance? There was no triumphant arrival, since he was only met by the local governor, rather than the king or crown prince. His entry at the GCC meeting also was less than grand. Following the MbS fist-bump, the greeting by enfeebled 86-year-old King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud highlighted the president's own ongoing physical decline.

To the good, there was no sword dance, in which an awkward President Donald Trump was featured. Nor a multilateral look into the bizarre modern version of Sauron's transparent orb, or palantír. And no rumored business deals for Biden's family, again in contrast to Trump. The president's objectives, however, went largely unfulfilled. There was no election-year Saudi recognition of Israel. Riyadh agreed to allow Israeli flights over the kingdom but, contradicting the president, denied that this was a prelude to diplomatic relations. The Saudis insisted that Israel improve its treatment of Palestinians first.

The official Jeddah Communique's section on "security and defense" was quite negative. Although no formal defense guarantee was offered, the two governments declared: "President Biden strongly affirmed the United States' continued commitment to supporting Saudi Arabia's security and territorial defense, and facilitating the kingdom's ability to obtain necessary capabilities to defend its people and territory against external threats." Unfortunately, the KSA has mostly used its military for malign objectives other than defense, such as attacking Yemen, sustaining Bahrain's minority Sunni royal dictatorship, and backing Islamist insurgents in Syria. Riyadh expects Americans to do the dirty work against Iran. This is not new. Defense Secretary Robert Gates once observed that the Saudis wanted to "fight the Iranians to the last American."

Unintentional humor crept into the document with its declaration that "the two sides underscored the need to further deter Iran's interference in the internal affairs of other countries, its support for terrorism through its armed proxies, and its efforts to destabilize the security and stability of the region." One suspects that the Saudi drafters had a good laugh about this language, just as Crown Prince "Slice 'n Dice" seemed to enjoy a reporter's question on Khashoggi. The Saudis, who invaded their neighbor Yemen, promoted, funded, and aided authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Bahrain, sought to overthrow governments in Syria and Qatar, and kidnapped the prime minister of Lebanon. Yet the royals decry foreign interference in their affairs! (And never mind *America's* record of unending intervention.)

Support was professed for regional integration of air defense, a useful objective, but one that should be used to reduce U.S. military responsibilities rather than increase American military entanglements in the region. Unfortunately, Riyadh intends to use every security promise to turn U.S. forces into bodyguards for the unpopular royals.

On Yemen there was more rhetoric disconnected from reality. The Jeddah Communique's language suggested that MbS and his cronies were somehow innocently caught in their neighbor's internal affairs. Said the U.S. and KSA: "Both sides affirmed their strong support for the UN-brokered truce in Yemen and stressed the importance of extending the truce and making progress to transform the truce into a lasting peace agreement. President Biden expressed his appreciation for the role King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have played in achieving and renewing the truce. The two sides stress their long-stated goal to end the war in Yemen, and called on the international community to take a unified position calling on the Houthis to return to peace talks."

If anything, the fact sheet was worse. It announced that both governments were "committed to taking steps to doing everything possible to extend and strengthen the UN-mediated peace." The paper also lauded Riyadh for pledging aid for Yemen.

This warranted another royal smirk. MbS recklessly launched the unnecessary war to reinstall a puppet regime in power. For seven years the Saudis bombed weddings, funerals, and everything involving civilians in between, as well as maintained a de facto blockade. Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis died—and continue to die—as a result.

Negotiating a peace agreement will be difficult, and all parties should do "everything possible" to continue the truce. But ending the war is easy: the killer prince could simply give the word. The kingdom need only stop attacking its neighbor and killing Yemenis. The insurgents also are authoritarian and brutish, but they were not interested in attacking Saudi Arabia until the KSA turned their nation into a charnel house. MbS should end what he foolishly started.

Last—but most important politically—the Saudis probably will, or at least might, pump more oil. Some. Eventually. Possibly. The president insisted, "I'm doing all I can to increase the supply for the United States of America, which I expect to happen. The Saudis share that urgency and based on our discussions today I expect we'll see further steps in the coming weeks."

Of course, this is utter nonsense. Riyadh doesn't want to flood the market with oil, obviously preferring higher to lower prices. Moreover, its ability to put more oil into the market is limited, and it already had planned to start increasing sales in July and August as part of the latest OPEC agreement. Any further increase would require the approval of OPEC, which will not meet until August.

The Saudis also denied the president's claims. Adel al-Jubeir, state minister for foreign affairs, said that "oil is not a political weapon, oil is not a tank." Rather, supply will be based on demand: "If you say did we promise more oil it means that we see a shortage in oil." After the president left, MbS ostentatiously criticized U.S. energy policies, especially regarding climate change.

Finally, any supply increase is likely to have at most a modest impact on prices, unlikely to be noticed or identified by American drivers. The president's desperate pitch for increased supply is like the man who murdered his parents and pleaded for mercy as an orphan. The Trump administration did its best to drive Iranian and Venezuelan oil from the market. The Biden administration is committed to reducing U.S. oil production and cutting Russian oil sales. The problem is U.S., not Saudi, policy.

The administration could end U.S. sanctions on Venezuela, which have failed to oust the ruling regime. The president also could make a deal with Iran to revive the nuclear accord. Biden could reverse his assault on domestic production. Most important, the administration could reflect on the fact that going to Riyadh while sanctioning Russia is empowering a backwards regime that is more repressive at home and has conducted a worse war abroad for a longer period of time. (Saudi Arabia also ranks lower than Iran on the Freedom House index.) The administration's trade-off is anything but humane.

Washington's foreign-policy establishment has spent decades kowtowing to Riyadh and affirming that the kingdom is a vital ally. That wasn't really the case then. It certainly is not today. And it makes no sense for America's president to play the submissive role, the supplicant desperate for royal favors. If the president wants to govern a superpower, he should act the part.

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