

The American Conservative

Is Saudi Arabia Coming Out of Exile?

Doug Bandow

September 29, 2022

Anyone who was anyone attended the funeral of Queen Elizabeth. Except Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. His frail father was invited. Not known is whether the invitation was exclusive to the king, excluding MBS (as the son is called), or the latter chose to skip the affair.

His peregrinations matter because he has not visited the United Kingdom since before his minions murdered and dismembered journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Despite the best efforts of the Trump administration, which deployed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as honorary mob consigliere to protect MBS, the latter was driven into diplomatic exile.

With Sunday the fourth anniversary of Khashoggi's murder, however, the crown prince is seeking the sort of murderous respectability achieved by other tyrants around the world. According to Associated Press reporter Aya Batrawy:

Saudi Arabia appears to be leaving behind the stream of negative coverage that the killing of Jamal Khashoggi elicited since 2018. The kingdom is once again being enthusiastically welcomed back into polite and powerful society, and it is no longer as frowned upon to seek Saudi investments or accept their favor. Saudi Arabia's busy week of triumphs included brokering a prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia, holding a highbrow summit on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly, marking the country's national day with pomp and pageantry, hosting the German chancellor and discussing energy supply with top White House officials. The kingdom is able to draw focus back to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious rebranding of Saudi Arabia and his goals to build both the world's largest sovereign wealth fund and pull the kingdom up from the G-20 to the more exclusive G-7 nations representing the biggest economies.

Perhaps Riyadh's revival is unsurprising. Even American policymakers who sanctimoniously lecture the world on human rights are famously forgiving of murderous allies bearing gifts. Especially oil from the Saudis. Yet the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is particularly odious.

The Kingdom is one of the worst, most oppressive regimes on earth, rated among the ten least free countries by Freedom House. The KSA gets seven out of 100 possible points; only the likes of North Korea, Eritrea, and Turkmenistan are worse. Explained Freedom House:

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 religious minorities face extensive discrimination in law and in practice. Working conditions for the large expatriate labor force are often exploitative.

Notably, the Biden administration hasn't caused MBS to make even a pretense of easing his brutal rule. Reported Batrawy:

Just last month, staggeringly long prison terms were handed down against two women for their Twitter and social media activity. A Saudi court sentenced a woman to 45 years in prison in August for allegedly damaging the country through her social media activity. It came on the heels of a 34-year-long prison sentence for another Saudi woman convicted of spreading 'rumors' and retweeting dissidents.

It isn't just Saudis who suffer. The Kingdom's brutal repression transcends national boundaries. The Freedom Initiative reported that "the widespread and systematic campaign of arrest, intimidation, defamation, imprisonment, torture, threats, and abuse are a global experience." Notably, "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 crown prince is not just tough: he is ostentatiously vicious and cruel.

Although with Biden's election Riyadh lost its strongest U.S. advocates—both Pompeo and Donald Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner enthusiastically represented the Kingdom in Washington—money, lots of it, has helped fill the gap. One of the most important Saudi factotums today is Norm Coleman, the Republican Minnesota Senator whose career was mercilessly, but narrowly, ended by comedian Al Franken.

The best that can be said of Coleman is that he is not quite as scummy as the late Edward von Kloberg III, known as the "lobbyist of the damned" for taking the most corrupt and infamous clients. According to an exposé in the Intercept:

"Coleman and several of his law firm colleagues are registered as foreign agents of the Kingdom. The emails [to Republican lawmakers, for whom Coleman raised money], as well as the details of the \$175,000 per month contract between Saudi Arabia and Hogan Lovells, the law firm, are all contained in filings submitted to the Justice Department. The contract is part of the Saudi government's robust lobbying operation that saw the kingdom spend \$21 million last year to gain influence in Washington, according to public filings."

And Kushner might be back, with \$2 billion provided by the Kingdom to Kushner's private equity fund. Whether these funds serve as recompense for past services, prepayment for potential future services, or both is unstated. However, the "investment" obviously is not about economics. Noted the Financial Times: "A Saudi screening panel found Kushner's operations to be 'unsatisfactory in all aspects.' But it was overruled by Prince Mohammed. This probably saved Kushner's venture. The Saudi fund accounts for most of its capital."

Unfortunately, the Kingdom is actively undermining U.S. interests. Just two months ago the president humiliated himself with his infamous MBS fist bump. Biden abandoned his self-proclaimed support for human rights in search of extra oil supplies. However, he received little energy for his efforts. Indeed, shortly afterwards, Riyadh coordinated with Moscow to cut production as part of the “OPEC plus” quota. As for the president’s claim that he expressed his concern over human rights to the crown prince, a top Saudi official denied the exchange, essentially calling the president, whose reputation as a fabulist is well-established, a liar.

Still, contended the *Financial Times*, “Though he opened himself to accusations of hypocrisy after having branded the kingdom a pariah, Biden’s embarrassment would have been worth the gain if it had undercut Vladimir Putin’s Russia. No such result has been visible. Saudi Arabia’s autocratic crown prince seems to have moved closer to Putin since then.”

The issue is not just Moscow. In August the Saudis unveiled their new economic favorite, Beijing: “The world’s largest oil-exporting company Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Saudi Aramco) has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec). According to an official statement from Aramco, the agreement outlines ‘pathways for strategic cooperation between Aramco and Sinopec and supports the long-term relationship between the two companies and their existing joint ventures in China and in the kingdom’.” As China’s economy, and thus demand for oil, continues to grow, so will Beijing’s role in the KSA.

Worst of all, the crown prince continues his murderous, nearly eight-year assault on neighboring Yemen. His initial attack was pure power politics, seeking to reinstate the pliant Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The latter’s ouster was merely the latest round of decades of intramural Yemeni conflict that did not at all concern the U.S. However, with Washington’s support, the Saudis and Emiratis committed mass murder and mayhem. Some 25,000 airstrikes have been launched, with nearly 20,000 civilians killed or injured. Nearly 400,000 Yemenis have died from disease, malnutrition, and more because of the war.

Far from giving the U.S. leverage to restrain royal ruthlessness, American arms shipments reinforced Riyadh’s worst practices. Observed the Cato Institute’s Jordan Cohen and Jonathan Ellis Allen, “the evidence suggests that the United States is empowering Saudi Arabia’s inhumane policies in Yemen. The U.S. military trained Saudi pilots, delivered billions in weapons to Saudi Arabia, and maintained Saudi planes and munitions. It is inconceivable that Saudi Arabia could commit human rights violations to the same level in Yemen without U.S. military support.” During the Trump presidency the State Department even warned that American officials might be guilty of war crimes, having facilitated brutal attacks on civilians.

U.S. policy in the Mideast is a disaster. Over the last two decades, Washington spent trillions of dollars to wreck other nations, including Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Indeed, the latter three have effectively ceased to exist. Societies were ravaged and economies were wrecked. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed. Yet U.S. officials evidently learned nothing, constantly repeating the past.

There’s no longer a serious argument for Washington to remain entangled in the Middle East. The oil market has diversified and could be further expanded by ending curbs on Iranian and

Venezuelan supplies. Israel is secure, a nuclear armed regional superpower that these days is more likely to oppress than liberate others. Supposed Arab “friends” are repressive and disruptive, with Saudi Arabia even worse than Iran. The Kingdom has invaded its neighbors, backed jihadist insurgents, supported oppressive regimes, kidnapped foreign leaders, and threatened fellow monarchs.

A U.S. military exit would force local combatants, so used to Washington doing their bidding, to address their own problems. Even the Saudis and Iranians are now talking to one another. Perhaps they will finally make peace. In any case, it is time for Americans to go home.