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## The American Conservative

### Who Is American Exceptionalism For?

*The international establishment believe America should treat other states better than its own citizens.*

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President Joe Biden's surprise decision to stand up for the interests of the American people in Afghanistan generated near hysteria among the Washington foreign policy establishment. Thinking Biden was one of them, everyone from venerated international pundits to retired military commanders expected that he would extend the endless Afghan war, as had his three predecessors.

Their outrage, however, was exceeded by that of foreign advocates of U.S. military intervention. For instance, the splenetic Mina Al-Oraibi, columnist for America's establishment-minded *Foreign Policy* and editor-in-chief of the United Arab Emirates' the *National*, could not believe that Biden would end Washington's participation in a war that did not serve America's interests. What of U.S. obligations to the gaggle of Middle Eastern governments as they mulct and oppress their peoples? American lives and wealth are supposed to be at such regimes' permanent beck and call.

While working in one of the world's more authoritarian nations—Freedom House rates United Arab Emirates alongside Iran as “Not Free”—she declared that “the United States can no longer claim to be the leader of the free world if it abandons strategic allies and vulnerable citizens.” While pursuing journalism in a wealthy dictatorship that has unexceptionally, even routinely, resisted the merest hint of political freedom, she denounced America, declaring that “abandoning strategic allies and vulnerable civilians is deciding to give up any pretense of being an exceptional nation.”

In fact, urged on by the Mideast's assorted autocracies, American policymakers spent decades treating support for brutally oppressive states as a mark of distinction. Even worse than the UAE is its closest collaborator, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman famously turning a Saudi consulate into an abattoir in which a critical journalist was sliced and diced.

Washington allowed these Mideast monarchs to effectively rent the U.S. military as royal bodyguards, just as the same despots hired foreigners to do the rest of their nations' dirty work. For this privilege, American presidents, such as the Bushes, were allowed to hold hands with KSA royals and bask in the praise of court-approved journalists. Such was the mess of pottage for which Washington officials sold their nation's birthright.

However, an even greater howler from Al-Oraibi's screed was her faux shock that "among policymakers in the Middle East, there is now an understanding the United States is no longer invested in maintaining stability abroad—unless its narrowly defined national interests are directly impacted." Apparently, she believed that until August 2021, Uncle Sam selflessly held Arab nations to his defense bosom, lovingly creating a safe, stable, peaceful Mideast for his adoring dependents. Then came the terrible shock of Afghanistan, after which the latter were rudely thrust into outer-darkness and expected to fend for themselves. Shock! Outrage! Injustice!

Of course, Al-Oraibi's definition of Washington "maintaining stability abroad" is protecting local dictatorships as they oppress their people and assault their neighbors. Further consider the record of the UAE and KSA. Invading Yemen. Supporting insurgents in Syria and Libya. The Saudi kidnapping of Lebanon's prime minister. The only time Riyadh and Abu Dhabi back stability is when it equates with tyranny. Their clients include Egypt's al-Sisi dictatorship, which is worse than Hosni Mubarak's rule, and Bahrain's oppressive al-Khalifa monarchy, a Sunni royal family which rules over a Shia majority. Al-Oraibi also enthused about Tunisian President Kais Saied, reportedly backed by the Saudis and Emiratis, who claimed both executive and legislative powers when ousting the elected government and suspending parliament, offering only vague promises to the Tunisian people in return.

Anyway, as she must know, even the Bushes tried to argue that their subservience to Middle Eastern nations' desires was intended to promote America's "narrowly defined national interests." No president would have succeeded in Washington announcing that the U.S. was protecting, say, the dissolute Saudi royals out of respect for the institution of absolute monarchy and love for the legion of princely parasites. The same goes for the UAE, though it receives less critical attention while more deftly buying influence in Washington.

This policy first came under serious challenge after 9/11. That the terrorist attacks had been planned, funded, and conducted by Saudis suggested that something was amiss with U.S. policy. Still, it took sustained public outrage at the privileged treatment of the Riyadh regime to just gain access to the federal government's analysis of and 9/11 report's classified section on Saudi support for Al Qaeda.

Unfortunately, the chimeric idea of Mideast stability long drove some of America's worst foreign policies. In fact, the modern Middle East was built upon revolutionary change, the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, followed by imperialist border-drawing by the British and French governments as they sought to plunder resources and extend influence.

Since then the region was anything but stable as the Western imperial project ran afoul of growing Arab nationalism. Indeed, there could be no more destabilizing policy backing creation of the new state of Israel, which made inevitable religious and ethnic cleansing that created bitter disputes over territory and refugees that continue to roil the region. Temporary expedients, such as the short-lived Baghdad Pact and Central Treaty Organization, ended badly. Investing in

unpopular dictators such as Iran's shah and intervening in such conflicts as the Lebanese civil war yielded no better results.

Over the last two decades U.S. policy has been overtly, ostentatiously, even joyously destabilizing. Destroying Al Qaeda and ousting the Taliban were *the original objectives* in Afghanistan. Washington's subsequent overreach—refusing to negotiate what amounted to a Taliban surrender and creating a government in the West's, not Afghanistan's, image—destabilized the entire region and led to last month's debacle.

Even more destructive was the invasion of Iraq, which wrecked that nation, triggered sectarian conflict, loosed what became the Islamic State, and empowered Iran. However, failure had no evident impact on the behavior of U.S. officials, equally myopic and hubristic, as Washington and Brussels orchestrated the overthrow of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, leading to years of civil war which continue to this day, and supported the vicious war against Yemen, the region's poorest nation, by the rapacious Saudi and Emirati royals.

The royal onslaught resulted in civilian slaughter, pervasive malnutrition and disease, territorial gains by the Houthi-led rebels, and rise of secessionist forces in the country's south. Tragically, Washington's ill-considered decisions made Americans accomplices to Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's manifold war crimes. Ultimately America has "invested in maintaining stability abroad" only during the rare moments when it has not been consciously destroying the established order.

Given this record, one can only laugh at Al-Oraibi's crocodile tears about the U.S. failing to do something—she never specifies what—"in countries like Libya and Yemen, where conflicts continue and nation-building is crucial." Never mind that Washington's defense dependents UAE and KSA spent years underwriting combatants in the first and directly doing the killing and destroying in the second. And that America's utter inability to stabilize let alone build nations in the Middle East had been showcased in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Apparently hoping to stoke Washington's jealousy and encourage its return to the failed policies of the last two decades, Al-Oraibi declared: U.S. officials "must understand Beijing comes across as a more reliable partner in the same way Russia proved a more reliable partner to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, ensuring his survival."

If the royals find themselves under popular attack, they will wait a long time for rescue by Beijing. The ever-sensible Chinese have invested their national resources, rather than squandered them on nation-building and mindless, interminable wars. The Russians might lend a hand, but only for a high price, and just to do the minimum for strategic advantage, as in Syria, which barely warrants being called a "nation" any longer. With no one else eager to provide a well-armed bodyguard, the Saudis and Emiratis remain desperate to keep the U.S. ensnared.

Al-Oraibi complained that "U.S. allies can no longer rely on Washington," but that is for the good. Why should America act as guardian of ruling regimes irrespective of their legitimacy and conduct? The U.S. should stop treating absolute monarchy as the wave of the future. Let the Saudi and Emirati royal families rely on China and Russia for their survival. Please! Let Washington's rivals take these dreadful moral and policy deadweights off its hands.

The basic question is, for whom should Uncle Sam work? Al-Oraibi believes for the Mideast's authoritarians. She offers faux empathy with "liberals in Afghanistan and the Middle East" who suffer so in the Arab nations Al-Oraibi defends. Her real concern appears to be to preserve

today's passel of dictatorships. She wrote: "Ultimately, the U.S. declaration of the end of the war in Afghanistan means the war is ending with no peace—and protracted wars often are made longer with unilateral withdrawals. The Arab world fears its lands will be the host of renewed violence as a consequence."

Of course, in this "Arab world" rulers routinely exploit and oppress their peoples, and therefore appropriately fear the "instability" of revolt and revolution. Instead of looking to outsiders for protection these governments should better represent their own people. Indeed, that is the ultimate lesson of Afghanistan: America's Potemkin Afghan creation represented Americans and Europeans more than Afghans. That alone doomed it to fail.

The Biden administration's pullout was bungled, but withdrawal still was long overdue, delayed by Washington's war party, whose members Middle Eastern dictators traditionally relied on for protection. After two decades of constant conflict, a U.S. president has decided to put the American people first in foreign policy. Governments in the Mideast and elsewhere around the world should adjust their policies accordingly. Biden should move forward, recognizing that what is most needed is not a foreign policy for the middle class, but a foreign policy for all Americans.

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