



US Should Stop Playing the Supplicant to Saudi Arabia

America, Not the Corrupt Medieval Dictatorship, Is the Superpower

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Pity President Joe Biden. His spendthrift fiscal policies spurred an inflationary wave. His sanctions against Russia roiled energy markets, already suffering from long-standing restrictions on the sale of Iranian and Venezuelan oil. When he went, hat-in-hand, to the oppressive Saudi monarchy the king refused to take his call.

The Emiratis treated him no better. Even though the US rushed to Abu Dhabi's aid when Yemen's Houthi rebels finally began shooting back after years of attacks on civilian targets, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayad al-Nahyan complained that Washington did not act sooner. Obsequious Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Abu Dhabi, prostrating himself while promising to do better in the future.

So far neither "friend" of America has produced any extra oil. Indeed, it appears that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MbS, is gambling on the return to power of Donald Trump, who acted as consigliere to the bin Salman crime family. The Saudi list of grievances is long, but all reflect anger that Washington sometimes puts America's interests before those of the Kingdom: "the administration's restrictions on arms sales; what [MbS] saw as its insufficient response to attacks on Saudi Arabia by Houthi forces in Yemen; its publication of a report into the Saudi regime's 2018 murder of the dissident and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi; and Biden's prior refusal to deal in person with the crown prince." For Crown Prince "Slice 'n Dice," used to kidnapping, jailing, killing, and even dismembering his critics, such behavior by Washington is unforgivable.

The Biden administration's current fixation is finding increased oil supplies as it pushes to ban Russian sales. Going to America's Persian Gulf "allies," particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was Washington's most natural move. However, both benefit from higher oil prices, collecting more revenue and stretching out production. Without being offered something in return, they had no reason to agree.

The administration also could satisfy its objectives by relaxing sanctions on Venezuela – Trump's attempt to achieve regime change by starving an already impoverished people failed spectacularly. The Maduro regime is malign, but Washington has punished the Venezuelan

people more than the government. Biden officials recently ventured to Caracas to discuss oil exports but so far have failed to act, presumably fearing the domestic political consequences.

Similarly, restoring the JCPOA, the nuclear deal with Iran, would bring substantially more oil onto the international market. The Trump administration's decision to wreck the agreement, a political gift to Riyadh and Jerusalem, proved disastrous. Although candidate Biden said he favored America's return to the pact, which limited Tehran's nuclear ambitions, President Biden retreated, fearing congressional criticism. So far he has refused to lift poison pill sanctions imposed by Trump to forestall revival of the deal, and the agreement is in limbo.

So oil prices remain painfully high with mid-term elections just six months away.

Now members of the infamous Blob, America's foreign policy establishment, are urging Biden to do a full kowtow to Riyadh (and presumably Abu Dhabi as well), doing the royals' bidding as before. After all, the relationship always has been about them. Years ago Defense Secretary Robert Gates observed that the Saudis were ever ready to "fight the Iranians to the last American." Nothing has changed.

For example, *Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria backed the idea of a "grand bargain," which would trade security guarantees for Saudi concessions: "There is a way for Washington to forge a new security umbrella in the region that includes Israel, Egypt and the gulf states. It would stabilize the security environment, foreclose the prospects of a nuclear arms race in the region and provide access to energy for the industrialized world. But that path would have to include making up with Mohammed bin Salman."

Bloomberg's Bobby Ghosh views the problem as personal and political immaturity: "The most important partnership in the Middle East has been put in jeopardy by the peevishness of a prince and political opportunism of a president. Repairing the Saudi-American relationship will require the first to behave like a grown-up, the other like a statesman."

Although Tufts University's Daniel Drezner was more skeptical that a satisfactory accommodation could be reached, he intoned: "I hope the Biden administration is conducting internal deliberations about what concessions it would be willing to make to engage in some transactional diplomacy with Saudi Arabia. As bad as Saudi behavior has been, Russia's bad behavior has been worse and merits a priority of focus."

This approach, which treats murderous wars and grievous human rights violations as minor inconveniences, is a terrible idea. To start, fulfilling demands by dependent regimes would undermine Washington's credibility. The Washington War Party has routinely insisted that the US should intervene militarily everywhere for the most spurious reasons to convince the world that it is prepared to go to war anywhere at any time for anything. Hence nonsensical claims that failing to bomb Syria over chemical weapons or stay in Afghanistan for a 21st year would trigger major power aggression around the globe. In fact, America's adversaries distinguish between serious and peripheral issues, and act accordingly. (Which is why Moscow withdrew from Afghanistan after only ten years compared to America's astounding two decades.)

However, US credibility really would be at stake if the administration submitted to Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's demands, acting as if it was a weak Third World state rather than global superpower. Again, putting royal interests first would encourage other defense dependents to

make similarly inflated and malign demands. Washington would be playing the supplicant and would be expected to do the same elsewhere.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia, in particular, and UAE are not normal countries, either liberal democratic or even moderately authoritarian allies. The Kingdom earned a rating of just seven out of 100 by Freedom House, making it one of the world's baker's dozen most repressive nations and territories, dwelling in the human rights cellar along with Equatorial Guinea, North Korea, Eritrea, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Riyadh is *much worse* than Russia, at least prior to that latter's internal crackdown to suppress any antiwar dissent, which made the latter much more like the KSA.

Those celebrating MbS's recent social liberalization are merely highlighting how until recently the Kingdom was a true totalitarian state, in some ways more absolute than Mao Zedong's China and Kim Il-sung's North Korea. Thankfully, those who face prison for dissent now can attend a movie before being locked up! Alas, a free society that does not make.

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."

Moreover, Riyadh is, despite Drezner's claim, a more malign actor internationally than Russia. The royal regime's alleged friendship with America never meant respecting America's interests. Especially once MbS took effective control of the government. The regime tolerated substantial financial public support for al-Qaeda until the group attacked the royals. Saudi Arabia also kidnapped a head of government (Lebanon), blockaded and made plans to invade another friendly state (Qatar), used money and troops to enforce brutal dictatorships (Bahrain, Egypt), and subsidized jihadist forces (Libya, Syria).

Worst was the invasion of Yemen. To reinstate a pliable regime in its desperately poor neighbor, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi joined in a "coalition," hiring countries dependent on their financial largesse, such as Sudan, which deployed ground forces in the conflict. Total deaths are estimated at roughly 400,000, 60 percent of them young children, who are particularly vulnerable to disease and malnutrition. Human rights group report that coalition activity, both air attacks and de facto blockade, is responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths.

Yet even as their government bombs and starves helpless people, Saudis play the victim. *Mohammed Khalid Alyahya, a visiting fellow at Hudson Institute, whined*: "an American government that seeks to stigmatize Saudi Arabia through childish name-calling while delisting the terrorist Houthi militia that fires Iranian-made missiles at Saudi cities, airports, and oil refineries, threatening our security and the lives of our citizens, is not behaving in the interests of both parties." No matter the thousands upon thousands of Yemenis that his government has killed over the last seven years.

War crimes have been many. For instance, The New York Times reported: "Year after year, the bombs fell – on wedding tents, funeral halls, fishing boats and a bus, killing thousands of civilians and helping turn Yemen into the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Weapons supplied

by American companies, approved by American officials, allowed Saudi Arabia to pursue the reckless campaign."

US officials bear moral responsibility for the harm they have continued to enable under the Biden administration. Indeed, they could be held legally liable as a result. Six years ago, "the State Department's legal office in the Obama administration reached a startling conclusion: Top American officials could be charged with war crimes for approving bomb sales to the Saudis and their partners."

In short, rewarding Saudi Arabia to further punish Russia would be a bad trade-off, for moral as well as practical reasons. Especially since the Saudis likely would undercut any promises to increase production – cheating by OPEC members always has been systemic and endemic. Nor would increasing the flow of Mideast oil necessarily significantly intensify pressure on Russia or affect Moscow's behavior. US economic sanctions have rarely forced regimes to act against what they viewed as fundamental political interests. The costs of such a policy would be substantial and real. The benefits would be speculative at most.

The better strategy would be for the administration to demonstrate that US officials will no longer be docile retainers for the Saudi and Emirati royals. For instance, the administration should stop helping them slaughter their poor neighbors. The US sold the aircraft, for a time refueled them, and still services the planes, supplies the munitions, and provides the intelligence. Washington should effectively ground the royal fleets by ending support services and weapons resupply. *That* would encourage the Saudi king to take the president's next call.

Moreover, the administration should indicate that the well-armed Gulf regimes are vulnerable to attack mostly because they lack domestic political legitimacy – who wants to die defending Crown Prince "Slice n' Dice" so can he murder another critic or build another palace? US military personnel should not be treated as mercenary bodyguards, the equivalent of the civilian expatriate labor used to do most of the "dirty work" in those societies. It is past time for the Saudis and Emiratis to earn their people's support. The KSA's uncertainty about America's continuing military commitment already has spurred the regime's talks with Iran, which could ease the region's dangerous Sunni-Shia split. Ultimately Riyadh and Abu Dhabi should take over responsibility for their security.

Congress should hold hearings on and the Justice Department should investigate the Kingdom's \$2 billion contribution to the investment fund of Jared Kushner, Trump son-in-law and Saudi fixer during the last administration. The Saudis almost certainly considered it to be a political investment. Of course, it might prove impossible to prove in court that the contribution was a reward for services previously rendered or pre-planned payoff should Trump return to power. Still, publicizing the payment, which highlights the inherent corruption of the US-Saudi relationship, would be enlightening. Riyadh should learn that it no longer can buy policy in Washington.

The administration also should announce that it is considering placing both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. The designation no longer has anything to do with promoting terrorism in the normal sense of the word. Rather, it is an arbitrary label used for political purposes.

The Trump administration applied it to the group Ansar Allah, which leads Yemen's insurgents as a final political payoff to the Saudis. Biden removed it, but UAE, horrified when the insurgents began shooting back – the regime apparently believed that war was a royal prerogative – has been lobbying the Biden administration to reimpose the designation. Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are no more terrorists than Ansar Allah, but they have utilized even more brutal military tactics, more often attacking, and killing civilians. Using the UAE's standards, coalition members should be designated as state sponsors of terrorism. News of the investigation alone would embarrass the royal regimes and make them less demanding.

Of course, Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's many high-priced US factotums warn that the royals might move closer to Moscow and/or Beijing. So what? Washington cannot expect to forever monopolize relations with other nations, especially given China's rapid economic growth. Anyway, the Kingdom would pay a price: moving toward Russia and China would increase tensions between Saudi Arabia and Europe as well as America. Moreover, only the US can service and supply the KSA's and UAE's existing weapons inventory; nor are Moscow and Beijing likely to offer comparable security guarantees. Let these whiny, demanding regimes shop around for support. Ultimately, the kleptocratic royals need America much more than America needs them.

Foreign policy sometimes requires difficult compromises. Thankfully, the Cold War is over. Russia is far less dangerous than the Soviet Union; today's united Europe is far more able to contain Moscow than yesterday's Western Europe. If Washington officials are going to confront Russia over domestic oppression and foreign aggression, they cannot excuse Saudi Arabia for the same.

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