



Biden Administration Goes All in for Saudis and Emiratis

Actively Intervenes on Side of Aggressors

Doug Bandow
February 16, 2022

Barely a year into the Biden administration Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have captured US Mideast policy. President Joe Biden has abandoned the human rights principles he once claimed to hold dear.

President Donald Trump also surrendered to the royals early, but he never evinced the slightest humanitarian concern about foreign policy. His son-in-law, Jared Kushner turned the administration's Mideast portfolio over to the Saudis. Trump subsequently justified the sale of weapons as a massive jobs program, despite the thousands of people killed by those American bombs. After the murder of Saudi journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi, Trump acted like a mob consigliere, dedicated to protecting Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from justice.

Better was expected of Biden. He sharply criticized MbS, promising to treat the latter as a "pariah." Candidate Biden complained that Trump had written the Saudis "a blank check." That seemed natural for a president who promised that "human rights will be at the center of our foreign policy."

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's human rights record is one of the worst on earth. The KSA comes in about 10 out of 210 countries and territories, with seven of 200 points, in the Freedom House "Freedom in the World" ranking. That puts it in territory occupied by North Korea, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Turkmenistan, and other bottom-feeding dictators.

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." Reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Saudi human rights activists, and even the US State Department tell a similar story.

The United Arab Emirates also is rated not free but comes in a bit higher at 17 points. That is ahead of China but still behind Russia. Reported FH: "Limited elections are held for a federal advisory body, but political parties are banned, and all executive, legislative, and judicial authority ultimately rests with the seven hereditary rulers. The civil liberties of both citizens and non-citizens, who make up an overwhelming majority of the population, are subject to significant restrictions."

As president, Biden promised to target US support for the Yemen war. And for good reason, given the carnage resulting from seven years of Saudi/Emirati air attacks on Yemeni civilians. Reported the *New York Times*: "Year after year, the bombs fell – on wedding tents, funeral halls, fishing boats and a school bus, killing thousands of civilians and helping turn Yemen into the world's worst humanitarian crisis." In September the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen issued its latest report: "Since March 2015, over 23,000 airstrikes have been launched by the coalition in Yemen, killing or injuring over 18,000 civilians. Living in a country subjected to an average of 10 airstrikes per day has left millions feeling far from safe."

The insurgents, known as Ansar Allah or the Houthis, engaged in atrocious war crimes as well, such as indiscriminate artillery fire. However, they lack US-supplied firepower. Humanitarian groups agreed that the air war conducted by the KSA and UAE caused the most civilian damage and casualties. Along with the de facto blockade imposed by the royal states and their hiring "coalition" partners, the result has been horrific. Nearly 400,000 civilians, an astonishing 70 percent of them children, have died, most from disease or malnutrition. Millions have been displaced.

According to the United Nations: UNICEF's Henrietta Fore reported that "2.6 million children are now internally displaced, deprived of health care, education, sanitation and safe water. Yemen's gross domestic product (GDP) has dropped 40 per cent since 2015, and despite the availability of food, 21 million people – including almost 11 million children – require humanitarian aid." The longer the conflict continues, the greater the harm. At risk, according to Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, are "5 million people are one step away from succumbing to famine and the diseases that go with it, and 10 million more are right behind them."

A year ago the president declared: "We're also stepping up our diplomacy to end the war in Yemen – a war which has created humanitarian and strategic catastrophe. ... This war has to end. And to underscore our commitment, we are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales."

However, he exhibited dangerous confusion when promising to help Saudi Arabia (and by implication the UAE) "defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people." For ongoing Yemeni attacks on the Kingdom (those on the UAE did not begin until January 2022) were retaliation for KSA bombing since Riyadh launched its first attacks in March 2015. Thus, protecting Saudi targets enabled ongoing offensive operations. Nevertheless, there was hope that Biden would end intensive US support for persistent attacks on civilians which the State Department warned could open US officials to charges of war crimes.

Since then the administration essentially went all in for the Saudi and Emirati royals, including supporting their manifold atrocities against Yemeni civilians. First, the president reiterated his commitment to Riyadh's defense even as the royal regime continued offensive operations. According to the White House, in a conversation the Saudi king last week "The President underscored the U.S. commitment to support Saudi Arabia in the defense of its people and territory from these attacks and full support for UN-led efforts to end the war in Yemen." Which, in practice, is no different than the Trump administration's policy.

Second, Biden's special envoy, Tim Lenderking, has not acted as a true mediator. Rather, he has represented the Saudi/Emirati position, reflected in the original UN resolutions, and treated the Houthis as if they had been defeated. Abdulghani al-Iryani of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies explained that "the calculus of the Houthis with UN council resolutions condemning them and demanding that they must surrender before they go into any serious peace negotiations has made it impossible for them to consider peace negotiations as an option."

Only if Lenderking takes Ansar Allah's interests into account do negotiations have a chance. Observed Annelle Sheline of the Quincy Institute: "the reason the Saudis feel ready to engage and the Houthis do not lies in the terms of the negotiation. Blinken failed to acknowledge that the Saudis' cease-fire proposal as well as the terms offered by US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking in March, impose harsh terms on the Houthis. The US and Saudi claim that they are pursuing peace is less than honest, because the plans they've offered the Houthis could encourage them to keep fighting rather than accept a truce. To end a war, the victors usually dictate terms to the losers. Imposing maximalist demands on the victors is futile: They will simply continue fighting." As they have.

Moreover, the administration has continued weapons sales, announcing another round in early February. The president appears to have lost any hesitation that he might have once had to peddling munitions to two dictatorships that show no hesitation in bombing civilians.

Even more significant was the announcement by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin of several actions to back the UAE, including deploying "5th Generation Fighter aircraft to assist the UAE against the current threat." The squadron of F-22 air superiority fighters "will also work with their partners in the United Arab Emirates to help defend the nation," said Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, head of Central Command. Although Washington previously enabled Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's attacks and crimes, the latest move turns the US into a direct, if distant, combatant. The US would save a lot more lives if it instead shot down Saudi and Emirati aircraft before they bombed civilians.

Finally, the administration also is considering relisting Yemen's insurgent Ansar Allah, or the Houthis, as a terrorist organization. The Trump administration did so shortly before it left office, in a decision widely recognized as dishonest and solely intended to hamstring Biden's officials when they took over. (Else why didn't the administration act months or years ahead when it could have enforced its decision?) The designation no longer has anything to do with terrorism as normally understood; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited Allah Ansar missile attacks, but the Saudi/Emirati coalition had committed many more atrocities; the Houthis had

few international connections vulnerable to sanctions; and the designation hampered humanitarian operations and cost civilian lives.

The incoming administration therefore reversed that decision, which created optimism for the future. Yet as noted earlier, Biden quickly adopted Trump's policy, with its bizarre fealty to the Mideast royals, destructive attack on the Yemeni people, and perverse focus on Ansar Allah. Reapplying the terrorism label to the Houthis would be the final step back to Trump's Yemen policy.

What has been the consequence of the Biden administration's embrace of the royal dictatorships? As the president passed his first anniversary in office, Saudi and Emirati air attacks were up, killing even more civilians. Reported the Yemen Data Project:

*"January 2022 was **the most violent month in the Saudi-led air war in Yemen in more than five years**. Yemen Data Project recorded **139 civilian deaths and 287 civilians injured** in Saudi coalition airstrikes in January, taking the **casualty toll to over 19,000 civilians killed and injured** since Saudi Arabia launched its bombing campaign in Yemen in March 2015. Not since October 2016 have more civilian casualties been recorded in a single month in the air war. **Saudi-led coalition airstrikes caused more civilian harm in the first month of 2022 than in the two previous years combined**. Air raid numbers increased 60% month-on-month from 250 in December to 401 in January – the highest monthly rate since March 2018 and the fifth consecutive month of rising bombing numbers. **Monthly air raid rates have more than doubled since the UN Human Rights Council GEE mandate ended on 31 October last year** in a notable escalation in the conflict amid reduced accountability. **The intensification of the bombing campaign in January included two air raids on hospitals; two water sites being bombed, 11 air raids on civilian vehicles; the bombing of a radio and TV station; a food truck and a food storage unit.**"*

Based on this behavior, the administration should declare Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to be state sponsors of terrorism. However, US officials have become little more than factotums of the Saudi and Emirati royals. Writer Kate Kizer complained that Brett McGurk of the National Security Council has made "perfectly clear there is zero accountability in the US alliance for either Saudi Arabia or the UAE." In contrast, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan opined: "We will work with our Saudi and international partners to hold [the Houthis] accountable" for *fighting back*. So much for the president's commitment to human rights – and concern for the lives of Yemeni civilians.

The US should never have partnered with Saudi Arabia and UAE in their criminal attack on Yemen. The latter has suffered through violence most of its modern existence, but the US-backed campaign multiplied the death and destruction visited upon the Yemeni people. Biden has become the third president to put royal ambitions before Yemeni lives. He and his officials should be held accountable for war crimes against Yemeni civilians.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.