



## Friends of the House of Saud: America Ever Owes the Royals Deference and Defense

Doug Bandow

December 13, 2021

No matter the many crimes committed by the House of Saud, defenders rush to take up their cause. The *Wall Street Journal's* [Karen Elliott House](#) was the latest. Readers can imagine tears cascading across her keyboard as she wrote about the plight of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which "is begging the U.S. for Patriot interceptors to defend itself against drone and missile attacks from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen."

House complained that this is bad for America for three reasons. "First, it endangers the Saudi people, who look to the US for protection." Actually, what endangers the Saudi people is their reckless crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and especially his continuing war of aggression against the KSA's much poorer neighbor.

Nearly seven years ago Riyadh attacked Yemen to reinstate the latter's pliable president, who had been ousted by a coalition of his predecessor and the armed Ansar Allah movement, known as the Houthis. The Saudi and Emirati air forces hit hundreds of civilian targets and killed thousands of civilians. The impact of the war – malnutrition and starvation, disease, poverty – killed hundreds of thousands more. Surprising the Saudis, Ansar Allah shot back. (Apparently, they believed winning wars without loss was just another royal prerogative.) The KSA should acknowledge that it has lost, halt its attacks, and seek a realistic negotiated settlement.

Next, House contended that administration policy "endangers an ally and benefits Iran." In fact, Saudi Arabia has no treaty commitment. Its value to American security is much overstated. The Saudi military performed miserably in Yemen. With the Abrahamic Accords Riyadh should look to Israel rather than the US as its chief security partner. As for economics, the oil market has changed dramatically, Riyadh's importance is much diminished, and the royals recently made clear that they will pump oil to suit their, not America's, interest.

Iran never has been heavily involved in Yemen. It was the Saudi attack which left the independent-minded Houthis little choice but to rely on Tehran for arms. And gave the Iranians a seeming Allah-sent opportunity to bleed the royal regime on the cheap. Ending the war and seeking a political accommodation would be the best way for Riyadh to reduce Iran's role.

Finally, she wrote, the president's approach "is politically self-destructive" since "it risks higher oil prices if missiles from Yemen hit Saudi oil fields." Perhaps true, though he already as

suffered enormous political damage from inflation generally as well as the recent run up in oil prices. Any additional harm might be slight.

In any case, that is no reason for him to change US policy. We expect – or at least implore – presidents to make policy irrespective of political advantage. House should be lauding Biden for acting in what he believes to be the nation's rather than his personal interest.

House wondered why the president would act in such a myopic fashion. She suggested that "he and his progressive allies are intent on punishing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for his alleged role in the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi," or "he dare not risk a single vote by Democrats offended by Riyadh's human-rights record."

These are possible motives, but the administration did approve an earlier arms sale. It also is possible that the president is applying pressure on the KSA to stop the war against Yemen. House appears not to realize that there are American officials who are offended by aggressive wars which cause needless civilian casualties.

Cute was her insertion of "alleged" in describing Khashoggi's murder, given the widespread agreement as to the very high likelihood that only MbS, as the crown prince is known, could approve such an operation. Who else would turn a consulate in an important country into an abattoir, murdering and dismembering a one-time royal confidante and subsequently high-profile journalist living in America?

However, House appeared to be most outraged at the indignity of the president not speaking to the great man of Saudi Arabia's future as the hardworking royal lounged restfully in his palace (or yacht), pining away while respectfully waiting to hear from his people's long-standing ally across the sea. She complained: "Mr. Biden's continued refusal even to speak to the crown prince, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, is petty." Perhaps, though better to be ignored by the president than to be kidnapped, shaken down, imprisoned, and/or executed by the crown prince – or worse, be his guest of honor at a unique royal family slice and dice party, like Khashoggi.

Her argument was almost tragically befuddled. She asked: why treat MbS so badly when "Mr. Biden speaks via Zoom to China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, both of whom have human-rights record at least as bad as Saudi Arabia's"? The simplest answer is that China and Russia both have nuclear weapons and conflicting interests. It is far more important to talk with serious adversaries than faux friends looking for someone willing to provide a cheap bodyguard, payable through the purchase of a few expensive warplanes.

Similarly, House whined that "despite Iran's horrendous human-rights record, the president seeks to revive a failed nuclear deal even as Tehran shuts out international nuclear inspectors and continues to produce enriched uranium." If anyone should want to forestall an Iranian nuclear weapon, it is a friend of the Saudi royals. Washington isn't talking (indirectly at this stage) with Tehran as a sign of friendship. The talks are an attempt to lower tensions and avoid conflict. Such a result would provide a much bigger payoff to America than seeking to salve MbS's wounded ego.

She marveled that Biden's political impiety came "at a time when the kingdom is moving in all the directions of modernization advocated by a succession of US presidents." All directions? House carefully referred to "modernization" as opposed to "liberalization." To appeal to Saudi Arabia's burgeoning youth population MbS abandoned moral strictures once enforced in return

for clerical loyalty, which obviously is good news. And Riyadh is making money on its new interpretation of Islam. Reported Screen Daily: "Less than four years after it lifted its ban on cinemas, Saudi Arabia's aim of becoming the Middle East's foremost filming location seems to be bearing fruit with two major Hollywood movies shooting in the country."

However, beyond finally allowing its people to attend movies and enjoy other social freedoms, the state still remains supreme – and authoritarian. MbS has ruthlessly crushed all dissent, so much for political and civil "modernization." Indeed, he left advocates of social liberalization in jail even after he turned their wishes into policies, such as women driving. He sent a clear message: he is the sole agent of any reform that does occur.

Freedom House assesses the Kingdom to be "not free," with just 7 out of 100 possible points. Saudi Arabia comes in at 200 of 210 countries and territories covered. Explains 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."

The State Department's annual human rights report is even more brutal:

*"Significant human rights issues included: unlawful killings; executions for nonviolent offenses; forced disappearances; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of prisoners and detainees by government agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners or detainees; serious restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including threats of violence or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, site blocking, and engaging in harassment and intimidation against Saudi dissidents living abroad; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to choose their government peacefully through free and fair elections; violence and discrimination against women, although new women's rights initiatives were implemented; trafficking in persons; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity; and restrictions on workers' freedom of association, including prohibition of trade unions and collective bargaining."*

Religious persecution also remains rife. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some ongoing improvements." Unfortunately, few of these advances, other than removal of some hateful teachings in textbooks, applied to non-Muslims. Noted the Commission: "The construction of non-Muslim houses of worship and public non-Muslim prayer is forbidden. Non-Muslims are not permitted to construct houses of worship and are confined to worshipping in private settings." Moreover, "Saudi Arabia continued to detain and mistreat individuals who dissented from the government's interpretation of Islam."

Here, too, State was even harsher: "The law criminalizes 'the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form,' 'any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam,' publications that 'contradict the provisions of Islamic law,' and other acts including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and

proselytizing by a non-Muslim. In practice, there is some limited tolerance of private, non-Islamic religious exercise, but religious practices at variance with the government-promoted form of Sunni Islam remained vulnerable to detention, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation."

Unsurprisingly, House appealed to the oldest of arguments for tyranny: the need for stability. Otherwise, how "To continue this modernizing path"? The tourists won't come if Saudi territory is attacked! Actually, that is another good reason for the Kingdom to quit its unjustified war against Yemen.

Finally, House's clincher was to cite the beta noire of the neoconservative war-making industry: Iran. Like the Saudis, House knew how to play the KSA card. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates once observed, the Saudis always are ready to "fight the Iranians to the last American."

Iran, responsible for every threat, crime, conflict, and danger in the Middle East, the royals and their American acolytes argue, justifies every drone campaign, war, invasion, bombing run, and other intervention. In House's view, "The US has nothing to gain by distancing itself from Saudi Arabia and thereby encouraging Iran to step up its decades long effort to weaken Riyadh, undermine the royal family, and lay claim to Islam's holiest sites and Arabia's oil."

Of course, to defend itself is why the Saudi royals supposedly spent tens of billions of dollars on weapons from America. Yet Riyadh seems far more interested in offense than defense: invading Yemen, kidnapping Lebanon's premier, underwriting jihadist radicals in Libya and Syria, isolating and threatening war against Qatar, and supporting oppressive regimes in Egypt and Bahrain. There may be no more malign actor in the Middle East. In contrast, the most positive step it took, opening diplomatic talks with Tehran, occurred only after the attacks two years ago on its oil operations. Riyadh then realized that even the Trump administration could not be counted on to defend it from attack.

The Saudi royals may not be the worst regime with which America must deal. However, there is no justification for acting as if the Kingdom is a special friend. There should be no more illusions about shared values and even interests. The US should treat Saudi Arabia like a normal country, responsible for its defense and accountable for its crimes. When justified, cooperation should continue, but without illusion.

*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.*