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Saudi Arabia shows Biden can't have it all

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The Biden administration has declared, loudly and proudly, that America would pursue a “foreign policy for the middle class” while, at the same time, “putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy.”

But President JOE BIDEN’s expected visit to Saudi Arabia, which would surely include a meeting with Crown Prince MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN, shows you can have one or the other, but you can’t truly have both.

Ask the administration, though, and they’ll say America can do it all. NatSec Daily spoke with a senior official who, without confirming the trip, said “our approach to Saudi Arabia more broadly shows we can carry out both of these charges simultaneously.”

The evidence the official cited was the release of intelligence assessing that MBS, as the crown prince is known, approved the murder of U.S. resident and Washington Post journalist JAMAL KHASHOGGI (though that didn’t lead to a direct punishment of the royal); a two-month extension of a truce in the Yemen war that could save many lives; and OPEC’s agreement to increase oil supply.

While human rights will always be “at the center of what we’re doing,” the official added, “we need our relationships to deliver for the American people.”

In other words, the Biden administration calculated that it’s more important for Saudi Arabia to fill the energy gap left by Russia — potentially providing relief at the pump, domestically — while enticing it to move closer to Israel and keep countering Iran.

It’s not so different from former President DONALD TRUMP’s decision, just days after Khashoggi’s killing in 2018, to accept Riyadh’s billions instead of severing ties. “I don’t like stopping massive amounts of money that’s being poured into our country,” he said at the time.

Therein lies the tension between a middle class-focused and a human rights-centered foreign policy: To fully punish a nation for its abuses risks losing the strategic benefits of its partnership.

The Biden administration tried to have it both ways until it needed Saudi Arabia again, moving issues of dignity to the fringes of the relationship.

“Our goal is to see a stable supply of energy, and of course Saudi Arabia is a partner in that,” the senior administration official said about maintaining close ties to Riyadh, making sure to note that the U.S. is still “not in the business of divorcing our values from our interests.”

The wisdom of the rapprochement depends on who you ask.

Using Saudi Arabia to lower gas prices and secure geopolitical gains doesn’t have to be divorced from human rights promotion if the U.S. molds the wayward crown prince into a moral king.

“Shaping young leaders into the types of decision makers America would like as partners takes mentoring, monitoring and shaping,” said KIRSTEN FONTENROSE, a former top Middle East official on Trump’s National Security Council. “There is no reason we can’t establish something akin to a private seminar series for MBS and the inner circle as well as other young leaders in the Gulf or elsewhere around the globe.”

Others aren’t convinced. “The perverse part is that I don’t buy the administration’s argument that there’s a tradeoff with Saudi. MBS will pocket concessions and they’re not going to bring gas prices down much,” the Cato Institute’s JUSTIN LOGAN predicted.

It was always hard to imagine that the U.S. would forever downgrade its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Throwing away 80 years of history over the grisly Khashoggi assassination was the least likely outcome, however immoral it may feel to admit. But to let Riyadh back into the inner circle for political expediency, when the initial vow was to make it a “pariah” on the world stage, underscores the misguided rhetoric of the administration’s initial intentions.

“Biden’s decision shows that a ‘foreign policy for the November elections’ contradicts both the interests of the middle class and human rights,” said STEPHEN WERTHEIM, a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Justin Logan is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He is an expert on U.S. grand strategy, international relations theory, and American foreign policy. His current research focuses on the shifting balance of power in Asia—specifically with regard to China—and the limited relevance of the Middle East to U.S. national security.