



Washington Examiner

No, the United States should not kowtow to Saudi Arabia to stick it to Russia

Justin Logan

April 28, 2022

The war in Ukraine grinds on, and Western observers seem to be growing frustrated with Russia's ability to sustain the war. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen has recently arrived at a ceasefire, although there are plenty of reasons to worry that it will revert to form. Some authors have begun to weigh tradeoffs in U.S. efforts in both theaters.

Fareed Zakaria writes that in order to impose more stringent energy sanctions against Russia, Washington needs to go hat in hand to Saudi Arabia and cut a deal for it to pump more oil:

The only plausible path to keep the pressure on Russia while not crippling the global economy is to get oil prices down. And the only sustainable way to do this is to get the world's largest "swing producer," Saudi Arabia, as well as other gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, to increase production of oil.

The thinking here has a number of moving pieces. The United States should offer Saudi Arabia "more solid security guarantees" to the House of Saud in exchange for the Saudis 1) promising to pump more oil, so that 2) we can sanction Russian oil, in order to 3) increase the suffering in Russia, in an effort to 4) decrease Russia's leverage at the negotiating table.

Zakaria hints, but does not expressly write, that this also means letting MBS off the hook for killing U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi, for running one of the world's most repressive, dictatorial regimes, and for prosecuting a war in Yemen that has been as shamelessly feckless as it has been destructive.

He admits that President Biden has already asked Saudi Arabia to pump more, and that it has declined. Zakaria concludes that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is simply holding out for a higher ransom, and that Biden must pay it.

Daniel Drezner weighs in on this idea, concluding that,

In the case of Ukraine, U.S. officials need to prioritize certain values (unprovoked territorial aggression) over others (human rights, democracy)... As bad as Saudi behavior has been, Russia's bad behavior has been worse and merits a priority of focus.

A few questions should be answered before we entertain the idea of granting more favors—let alone security guarantees—to Saudi Arabia.

The first question is why the United States should promise more rather than threaten some? Washington has long struggled to apply leverage to its partners and clients in the Middle East , but the basic facts of the situation are in the U.S. favor. Since the United States is a very secure great power that dominates a hemisphere, and since Saudi Arabia is a militarily feckless regional power that lives in a worse neighborhood, by definition, we can offer them more than they offer us. But we can also take it away.

Instead of making security guarantees to Saudi Arabia, the United States could threaten to remove some of its support for the country unless it increases production. The removal of U.S. troops from Syria, or more forcefully, from Saudi Arabia itself, would send tingles down MBS's spine. Perhaps instead of going on an apology tour in the Middle East to Saudi Arabia's allies , Antony Blinken or Jake Sullivan could pound their own fists on the table and remind everyone who the superpower is.

Even if U.S. policymakers were to spare the rod and spoil MBS, though, what reason is there to believe that Saudi Arabia will increase production based on commitments from the United States? The U.S.-Saudi relationship has frequently been characterized as “oil for security”: the Saudis pump oil for us, and in exchange, we protect their security. But the Saudis pump oil for themselves, not for us, and there are precious few examples of Saudi production decisions being made on the basis of pleas from the United States, despite Saudi Arabia's outsized presence in U.S. politics. Presidents from Clinton , to Bush , to Obama have whined and wheedled for Saudi Arabia to increase production, to little end.

Saudi Arabia's production decisions have almost always been made on the basis of profit maximization for Saudi Aramco. U.S. decisions about foreign policy should be made with the same ruthlessness. Getting out of the Middle East is a good idea whose time has come; if we can use it as a cudgel to get more Saudi production in the short-term, so much the better.

Finally, for Drezner, one might ask what makes Russia's behavior worse than Saudi Arabia's? Is it worse in terms of posing a greater threat to U.S. interests, or to U.S. values (or both)? Or is it simply that the war in Ukraine is more of a short-term problem, and that if we get Saudi cooperation we can deal with Saudi later?

Russia invaded Ukraine because it feared that neighbor's international alignment and wanted imperial influence over it. That sounds quite comparable to what Saudi Arabia has done to Yemen. While it is true that Europe is more important to the United States than the Middle East is, Russia's blundering in Ukraine has made clear that it can pose little threat to the industrial heartland of Europe —the vitally important parts that created a U.S.

commitment to Europe in the first place. Those important U.S. security interests in Europe appear to be in little danger from Russia.

As to the idea that Russia's behavior has been morally worse, I would note that by the end of 2021, the UN calculated that Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen had 377,000 deaths to its credit, with more than 260,000 of those children under the age of 5 . Millions have been displaced. What makes the monstrous cost in Yemen less bad than the brutality in Ukraine?

And if we're arguing about violations of first principles here, in the case of the Saudi war in Yemen, the United States has aided and abetted the aggressor since the day it first aggressed. As Bruce Riedel told the New Yorker's David Remnick in 2018 :

The United States is not a direct party to the war, but we are an enabler of the war. If the United States decided today that it was going to cut off supplies, spare parts, munitions, intelligence, and everything else to the Royal Saudi Air Force, it would be grounded tomorrow.

I doubt that Saudi Arabia would be a trustworthy partner in working to take Russian oil offline. But if we want Saudi cooperation in turning the screws tighter on Russia, we should try sticks, not carrots . Being an even-greater enabler of this Saudi regime—to say nothing of the costs of providing it with “more solid security guarantees”—seems like too high a price to pay.