

Lebanon Calls Out The Royals

When will the Biden administration do something to check the Saudi and Emirati cruelties in Yemen?

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is upset. Riyadh accused Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi of “insulting” remarks, expelled Lebanon’s ambassador, and halted trade with Lebanon. The United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain followed suit, shocked, shocked to be called out for their criminal invasion of Yemen.

Before his appointment Kordahi was impolitic enough to speak the truth about Yemen’s Houthi insurgents “defending themselves ... against an external aggression.” That wasn’t all, however. He observed that “homes, villages, funerals and weddings were being bombed” by the Saudi-Emirati dominated “coalition.” All true. Perhaps most painful of all to the bloody aggressors, he said the war—approaching its seventh year with the Emiratis disengaging and Saudis losing—was “futile” and that it was “time for it to end.”

Too bad he left out the major coconspirator, the U.S. The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations sold and serviced warplanes, supplied munitions, provided intelligence, and for a time refueled Saudi aircraft. Thus, Washington shared responsibility for the Kingdom’s murderous attacks. The State Department even warned that American officials could be charged for war crimes.

Alas, murderous aggressors always hate the truth. Nearly seven years ago the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Emirates organized the unprovoked invasion of Yemen, the poorest nation in the Middle East. They brought along Bahrain, an autocratic Sunni monarchy that has brutally oppressed its Shia majority with the KSA’s military and financial assistance, and several other governments, most notably Sudan, which provided mercenaries to do the actual fighting.

Like many civil wars, all the parties deserve to lose. Ansar Allah, known as the Houthis, is also authoritarian and brutal. The movement has been in revolt against the central government for nearly two decades. The latest round featured an alliance between the Houthis and the previous president, against whom they had long fought, which eventually collapsed and ended in his

death. Such are the vagaries of Yemeni politics. Modern Yemen has suffered division and strife for most of its roughly six decades of life.

However, at least the Houthis don't invade their neighbors, unlike the Saudis and Emiratis. The monarchies intervened to restore an unpopular but pliant regime to power. Iran has been oft blamed for the fighting but was never much of a player in Yemen. Instead, Tehran took advantage of the Allah-sent opportunity to bleed the incompetent Saudi royals. Indeed, this is the Kingdom's second military intervention in Yemen, and is going no better than the first time.

Most Yemenis have suffered, many grievously—death, injury, disease, malnutrition, mistreatment, imprisonment, and more—as a result of the conflict. Getting accurate statistics isn't easy, but roughly a quarter million people are thought to have died, most of them civilians. Some from military action, with two-thirds to three-quarters of the casualties and destruction attributable to the coalition. Most of the civilians succumbed to indirect causes, widespread disease and malnutrition/starvation, resulting from destruction of commercial and humanitarian infrastructure and an immiserating coalition blockade.

A recent United Nations briefing reported on UNICEF's Henrietta Fore, who "said 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. Twenty million lack access to health services." Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, warned "that 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."

Given the facts, Kordahi let the murderous Saudi and Emirati regimes off easy.

Nor is Yemen their only offense. MbS has been especially active in wreaking havoc throughout the region. Four years ago he kidnapped Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri on a visit to Riyadh. The latter was forced to announce his resignation—instantly repudiated when he finally was allowed to fly home after MbS found himself under global pressure to free his prisoner.

The Kingdom funded the 2013 military coup in Egypt and oppressive new Dark Ages which descended on that land. Riyadh underwrote Islamist insurgents in Syria and Libya. Saudi money and troops helped crush the democracy movement that threatened the oppressive al-Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain. Riyadh is thought to be behind the anti-democratic upheaval in Tunisia. The KSA and UAE also launched the diplomatic campaign against Qatar, which originally was to culminate in military intervention. The latter reportedly was thwarted by U.S. pressure and Turkish assistance.

The Kingdom, Emirates, and Bahrain also are strikingly repressive at home, all rated not free by the group Freedom House. The Saudis are the worst of the bad lot. Explained the humanitarian group: "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.”

Bahrain is little better. Said Freedom House: “Bahrain’s Sunni-led monarchy dominates state institutions, and elections for the lower house of parliament are no longer competitive or inclusive. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the authorities have systematically eliminated a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down harshly on persistent dissent concentrated among the Shiite population.”

UAE completes the oppressive trifecta. According to Freedom House: “The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates led in practice by Abu Dhabi, the largest by area and richest in natural resources. 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 noncitizens, who make up an overwhelming majority of the population, are subject to significant restrictions.”

These three nations, U.S. defense dependents all, pose a significant challenge to the Biden administration agenda. The president said he planned to emphasize human rights and democracy yet has little changed the Trump administration’s effusive embrace of the same regimes. The president quickly dropped plans to treat MbS as a “pariah,” even though the latter was responsible for turning his nation’s Istanbul consulate into an abattoir where Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist then living in America, was murdered and dismembered.

Nor has the president halted military support for Saudi aggression against Yemen; rather, his administration relabeled offensive military operations as defensive. Washington’s diplomatic push has been based on an outdated U.N. resolution that effectively prescribed a Houthi surrender, which won’t happen given the movement’s successes against the vanity Saudi military. Explained Abdulghani al-Iryani of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies: “we need to level the playing field for peace negotiations by replacing the existing UN Security Council resolutions with resolutions that are equally supportive of peace negotiations and equally punitive of the violations that are committed by all sides.”

In the end, business-as-usual won’t work with these oppressive, undemocratic regimes. Lebanon should stand firm. The prime minister invited Kordahi to resign, which the latter refused to do. Beirut is in desperate political and economic shape, but Riyadh long played a malign role, backing Sunni forces in a destructive sectarian system, in which political offices and economic benefits are divided among religious movements and political factions.

Rather than allow themselves to be bought or intimidated by the KSA and UAE, the other Arab states should insist that the Saudis and Emiratis engage in a sustained dialogue with Tehran. In fact, that process began once the Saudis realized that President Donald Trump, despite his bizarre, sycophantic fealty to the monarchy, was not willing to start a war on its behalf. Arab states should press both sides to move forward. Just as much of the world does not want to have

to choose between the U.S. and China, much of the Mideast doesn't want to have to choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

As for America, the last two decades have seen a disastrous passage of arms in the Middle East. The most important lesson Washington should have learned is the importance of staying out. Iraq and Libya were bigger mistakes, but Yemen was the least justifiable, an immoral gift to perhaps America's worst, most oppressive friend. President Joe Biden should stop sacrificing U.S. principles and interests for Riyadh's benefit.

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