



Treat Saudi Arabia Like a Normal Country: No More Special Favors for a Murderous, Aggressive Regime

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One of the Saudi royals slunk into town last week. There was little press coverage. Indeed, Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman, son of the king, might as well have been a covert agent for all the publicity that he generated.

President Joe Biden apparently wanted to downplay his continued reliance on America's dubious ally in the Middle East, after promising to treat Riyadh as a "pariah." It now looks like business-as-usual for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as administration officials speak of a "recalibration" of the alliance.

This Saudi royal, like his brother, the crown prince, was involved in the gruesome murder of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi. Khalid bin Salman then was his country's ambassador and apparently baited the trap by telling Khashoggi to go to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate. The ambassador later lied to the US about Riyadh's involvement.

Opined the *Washington Post's* Josh Rogin: "If Biden's team is really trying to pressure Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to improve on human rights, deepening ties with his brother Khalid is exactly the wrong way to go about it." Alas, the administration isn't even trying.

Riyadh long has been a grievous embarrassment for America. In pursuit of oil and weapons sales, US officials spent years acting like supplicants, lavishing attention, praise, weapons, and protection on an absolute monarchy and totalitarian state. Presidents and kings proclaimed their eternal fidelity to one another while holding hands and mugging for the press. Washington ignored the Kingdom's popular backing for Islamic terrorists and royal promotion of Islamic radicalism.

The Trump administration was uniquely shameful in the obeisance it paid to the KSA. The president fawned over MbS, showcasing the Saudi in the Oval Office. On arriving in Riyadh Secretary of State Mike Pompeo metaphorically planted his lips on MbS's derriere for the duration of the visit. Neither the slaughter of Yemeni civilians nor the murder of Khashoggi diminished the Trump administration's willingness to excuse any Saudi excess or crime. After a Saudi pilot being trained by the American military murdered US personnel, Trump called the Saudi king before addressing the American people, reassuring the royals that their privileged position would not change.

Biden criticized his predecessor's slavish devotion to a regime notably worse than Iran, upon which the Trump administration had a perverse fixation, probably as a result of its readiness to subcontract Mideast policy to Saudi Arabia and Israel. For Trump, US interests in the Middle East tended to come in third, at best.

The president's progressive backers had high hopes after he promised to end Washington's support for the Saudis' aggressive war against Yemen and treat Riyadh as the "pariah" that it deserved to be. He reiterated his commitment when he spoke to State Department personnel shortly after taking office.

Of course, one of America's biggest foreign policy challenges is dealing with autocracies. During World War II the US partnered with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War Washington made common cause with a range of authoritarian regimes. Sometimes prudence requires making difficult choices.

However, the end of the Cold War reduced the need, so often exaggerated, for America to ally itself with thieves, criminals, murderers, and aggressors. The importance of the Middle East has dramatically diminished. The US no longer faces a rival hegemonic power that could threaten the West's access to oil. The region no longer matters as much in the expanding global energy market. And Israel, always more a domestic political than international security issue for America, has become a regional superpower well able to defend itself.

All of which means the US has no need to continue treating the Kingdom as if it were a great power upon which America's future rests, let alone a democratic exemplar sharing America's values.

Yet MbS's brother made his unheralded pilgrimage to America. He lauded his "great meeting" with Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The prince said they discussed "the strategic Saudi-U.S. partnership" and "ways to strengthen Saudi-U.S. ties," as well as regional matters, most obviously Yemen. Bin Salman also met Victoria Nuland, Undersecretary of State. The State Department said the two discussed the Yemen war and human rights. However, the administration didn't indicate *what* was said about the Kingdom's human rights record, which is abysmal, and the war in Yemen, which is an endless atrocity. There is no indication that Riyadh promised any improvement in either.

On human rights the KSA is near the bottom in the world. Freedom House assessed Saudi Arabia as "not free," scoring just 7 out of 100 points and landing, alongside Somalia, at number 201 of

210 countries and territories. The group explained: "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."

At least initially, the Saudis were worried about the new administration's professed interest in human rights and released a couple of high-profile prisoners of concern to America – most importantly Loujain al-Hathloul, imprisoned and tortured for embarrassing Riyadh by campaigning to end the ban on women driving. However, this did not represent any fundamental relaxation in the tyranny which has settled upon the Kingdom. Reported the *Financial Times*: "Waves of crackdowns have continued. Hundreds of activists remain in prison, according to human rights groups." Indeed, last week Reporters Without Borders labeled the Kingdom a "press freedom predator," explaining that it used "spyware, threats, abduction, torture, sexual abuse of detainees [and] solitary confinement" against journalists.

In May Human Rights Watch detailed: "Saudi authorities' repression of dissidents, human rights activists, and independent critics remains at full force despite the releases of some prominent activists in early 2021 The sentencing of three men in March and April to lengthy prison terms on charges related to their peaceful dissent and expression underscores the authorities' continued campaign of repression." Explained HRW's Michael Page: "Saudi Arabia's release of several prominent activists does not signal a softening of repression when the country's terrorism court is spitting out 20-year sentences for peaceful criticism."

Even worse has been the hideous Saudi war against Yemen. The royals long have meddled in their chaotic, impoverished neighbor. There is nothing unusual in such behavior: The US and other great powers tend to do what they can to smaller, weaker states. A half century ago the Saudis intervened in a Yemeni civil war in which the KSA armed forces battled Egyptian troops. Since then the royals tended to rely more on money and propaganda than soldiers to achieve their ends, but in 2015 Riyadh went to war. The objective was to restore to power the president who had been ousted by a coalition between a movement known as Ansar Allah or the Houthis, and Ali Abdullah Saleh, the previous president, who had been forced out as part of the Arab Spring.

None of this had much to do with the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or anyone else. However, MbS imagined a short war of a few weeks to cement Saudi control. Now, after a brutal six-year war against Yemeni civilians Riyadh is suffering as Ansar Allah targets the Kingdom with missiles and drones. It is wrong to attack civilians and the Houthis have committed their share of atrocities. However, the sanctimonious hypocrisy of the royals complaining of attacks on the Kingdom – retaliation for years of killing Yemeni civilians with little consequence and no regret – is extraordinary even for them. The royals apparently presume that their princely status privileges them to engage in bloody aggression and cruel slaughter in which their opponents are not allowed to shoot back.

The president promised not to aid Saudi offensive operations but said the US would continue to assist in the KSA's defense. However, there is nothing defensive about the latter's involvement

in Yemen. The country, which once was two states, has been in frequent turmoil throughout its life. Riyadh joined and expanded the war for its own advantage. Today "defense" of the Kingdom means protecting it *as it continues to prosecute the war*. The US should do nothing for the Saudis – sell new weapons, service old systems, or provide munitions – so long as Riyadh is conducting offensive military operations against Yemeni territory.

Diplomacy is necessary. Negotiations which reflect the reality that the arrogant, blundering, incompetent, murdering royals have *lost*. The Quincy Institute's Annelle Sheline explained: "Yet the reason the Saudis feel ready to engage and the Houthis do not lies in the terms of the negotiation. [Secretary of State Antony] 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."

The administration should revamp its policy for reasons of both principle and practical. Continuing to offer essentially unconditional support to the Saudi royals makes a mockery of the administration's claimed commitment to human rights and sacrifices American security for the benefit of the al-Saud family.

The choice is not between following the Trump administration in acting as handmaidens for the royals and going to war with the Kingdom, as some of the Saudis' Washington fans seem to imply. There is no need to treat Riyadh as an enemy. Rather, the US should simply view the KSA as a normal nation, in which commercial relations, especially involving oil and weapons, can proceed without political oversight and official manipulation. And in which the well-armed Saudis would be expected to work with friendly neighbors, especially the other Gulf states and Israel, to ensure their and regional security.

Finally, the Biden administration should complete its break with the Trump administration's failed "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran – which left Iran closer to a nuclear weapon, Gulf oil traffic disrupted, Saudi oil facilities vulnerable to attack, and US forces in Iraq under regular missile fire. In this case, America ended up last by putting the Kingdom first. In particular, Washington should encourage the KSA to develop working relationships with its adversaries, most obviously Iran and Syria, with which it has begun to talk.

Throughout its history the US has worked with governments of all sorts around the world. Washington should continue to maintain positive relations with Saudi Arabia. But no longer should the Saudi royals be allowed to direct American policy. Rather, the US should note that absolute monarchy is not the wave of the future and hold Saudi officials, starting with the crown prince, accountable for their crimes. It is time for the Kingdom to live by the same standards as everyone else.

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