



## Joe Biden Said He Was Against Endless Wars: But His Defense Secretary Is for Endless Entanglement

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Can't America ever walk away? Like an abused spouse, Washington keeps returning to the Middle East and prostrating itself before vicious dictatorships, antediluvian monarchies, sectarian oppressors, lazy looters, and selfish aggressors.

Washington's latest kowtow to all came from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin when he spoke on Saturday before the Manama Dialogue, a security conference in Bahrain. The host government is one of the most brutal oppressors in a region in which even nominal democracies – Israel and Lebanon – leave large sections of their populations disenfranchised and oppressed.

Bahrain is an authoritarian Sunni monarchy which rules over a majority Shia population. The military is meant for internal control, not foreign defense. When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011 Hamid bin Isa Salman al-Khalifa – who had promoted himself from emir to king in 2002 – relied on Saudi and Emirati money and troops to crush pro-democracy protests. Ironically, the only potential outside security threat facing Bahrain is also posed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, should Manama decide to liberalize. In 2017 Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, detained Lebanon's prime minister, a nominal ally, on an official visit, over anger at Iran's role in that country, and threatened to invade neighboring Qatar because of the latter's independent foreign policy.

After warmly addressing Bahrain's King Hamad and Saudi Crown Prince bin Salman, Austin promised to sacrifice American lives and resources on their behalf. After all, that's what Americans do in the Middle East. No need for the region's governments to do anything on their own behalf or improve their human rights records. Washington has their back, no payment required!

Indeed, he improbably made the US into the supplicant, supposedly benefiting from its association with the local military behemoths: "Our network of allies and partners in the Middle East and beyond is a huge force multiplier. It's a vast strategic advantage. It is unmatched. It is unparalleled. And it is unrivaled. And we are deeply grateful."

Such drivel is unbecoming someone representing America and supposedly responsible for US security. Imagine Austin as team captain in a schoolyard sports contest: he would choose the spoiled royal wimps last, desperately trying to fob them off on his opponents. (Such "powers" typically benefit the *other side*, like Italy in World Wars I and II, only worse!) Most Mideast regimes create militaries for foreign prestige and domestic repression, not combat.

If the power of the assorted Mideast regimes was such an advantage, so unmatched, unparalleled, and unrivaled, then why do they require America's presence to protect them from Iran, an economic wreck after years of immiserating US sanctions? Why have they proved shockingly incapable of defeating Yemen – the region's poorest nation – even with American aid *for seven years*? Who is fooling whom to suggest that these countries are useful strategic assets rather than embarrassing geopolitical liabilities?

Equally ludicrous was Austin's advice to the attendees: "I've learned that we can do so much more when we come together than when we let ourselves be split apart." This from the man who oversees a military which was responsible for the destruction of several countries and deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslim civilians through multiple wars over the last two decades. "Coming together" doesn't seem to adequately describe US policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen – debacle after debacle.

However, Americans continue to work with these and other oppressor regimes, many of which hire out all the "dirty work" to foreigners. After all, who would want to die protecting their luxurious, licentious, sybaritic rulers? Yet US military personnel are stuck doing so. In this case they act as bodyguards for royal elites whose own citizens refuse to fight.

Consider the ingloriously incompetent Saudi military performance in Yemen. In early 2015 Crown Prince "Slice 'n Dice" bin Salman, known for imprisoning, murdering, and dismembering his critics, launched an aggressive war expected to last a few weeks. Today the royal military continues to lose ground as Yemeni insurgents retaliate with drones and missiles. Without the obeisant US military available to provide and service planes, supply munitions, and offer intelligence, the Saudis likely would have ended the war long ago.

In unleashing murder and mayhem on Yemen, MbS, as the Saudi crown prince is known, was joined by contemporary MbZ, or Mohammed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates. At least the UAE is a more capable aggressor, called "little Sparta" by General and later Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. Of course, that is no compliment in America, supposedly a democratic nation committed to human liberty. And the Emiratis have lived down to their reputations, spending much time and effort killing Yemenis, as well as intervening elsewhere in the region.

In Egypt, a brutal autocracy, the military has become a ruling caste, with military service a path to power and wealth for those in command. The armed forces have controlled the state since the coup by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954, except for the brief presidency of Mohamed Morsi from 2012 to 2013. The military also dominates the economy, enjoying perks and preferences that enrich the officer corps. Given peace with Israel, the armed forces have not fought a war for a half century. They primarily amass hi-tech weapons for prestige and pleasure.

Perhaps most embarrassing was Austin's pretense that something other than money held these nations together. He told the assembled crowd: "From President Biden on down, we're committed to strengthening the bonds between governments of goodwill – and to working together to expand the circle of security, and opportunity, and self-government, and human dignity."

It is worth remembering that America's best friends tend to be the most repressive. (Even Israel flunks this test if Palestinians are considered; millions in the West Bank suffer under a system akin to Apartheid.) Freedom House rates 210 countries and territories. Egypt collects 18 out of 100 possible points and ends up tied at 177-178. UAE had 17 points and was stuck at 179-181. Bahrain collected 12 points and a spot at 188. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the big loser, earning just 7 points and a spot at 198-200. Of the KSA, said Freedom House: "Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties." It takes brutal effort to come in lower than the Saudi royals, achieved only by such horrors as North Korea, Eritrea, and Turkmenistan. But such is Lloyd Austin's notion of human dignity.

The basic flaw in Austin's analysis, if it deserves to be called that, is that he presumes American security is vitally implicated by the Middle East. He told the forum: "no one should doubt our resolve or our capabilities to defend ourselves, and all those who work alongside us to keep this region secure." However, our presence there today has little to do with "defending ourselves."

Even if during the Cold War the region was vital to America, it no longer is. There are many more sources of energy, including in the US. Israel is a nuclear-armed regional superpower. If the regional royals cannot mobilize their peoples in their defense, they should adopt meaningful reforms. Americans' destiny should not be to act as bodyguards for dissolute Arab royal families.

Austin showed his bias on several occasions. Regarding Yemen, against which even the State Department believes that US officials have committed war crimes, he urged the insurgents to halt their attacks, including retaliation against the KSA for years of killing civilians, but failed to call on the Saudis to stop their dirty work. He said the US was determined to halt all attacks on the Kingdom *but not by the Kingdom*.

Austin also pretended that Tehran, whose total military spending is a rounding error for the Pentagon, poses a threat to America, which has ringed Iran with allies, bases, and fleets. And his lengthy riff against Tehran, which deserves plenty of criticism for its repression and aggression, was ostentatiously dishonest for failing to mention that Washington's departure from the nuclear accord and duplicitous attempt to maintain additional economic pressure while restoring the agreement. Washington has no one to blame but itself for Iran's recent nuclear activities.

Indeed, the best hope for the region comes from increasing discussions among contending neighbors. Riyadh and Tehran have held talks brokered by Baghdad. Saudi Arabia finally busted the blockade of Qatar. Turkey and UAE are meeting. The latter also is engaging Syria, moving toward normalization of relations after attempting to overthrow the Assad government. Early last month Jordan and Syria restored full diplomatic ties.

The best that can be said about Austin is that the administration he represents is not as bad as its predecessor. On almost every measure, including subservience to Saudi and Israeli interests and ruinous fixation on Iran, the Trump administration was worse.

Instead of continuing in the direction indicated by Austin, the US should turn ever more military responsibilities over to the region's members. The Middle East never was as important as Washington believed. It is even less important today. Biden should bring home American personnel and encourage Washington's friends to work together to create a new cooperative security architecture, buttressed by political reforms that give peoples as well as elites a stake in regional stability and security.

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