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Time to Treat Saudi Arabia as the Anti-Christian Dictatorship It Is

This is the medieval satrapy Joe Biden begs to save him from his own energy disasters.

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President Joe Biden has adopted begging as a new diplomatic strategy. Oil prices are high, filling Saudi coffers and offering Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman a chance to add another yacht, French chalet, or even Rembrandt — presumably a real one, this time — to his collection. After all, rising petroleum prices spare him the need to shake down another gaggle of billionaires for profit and pleasure. (MbS, as the crown prince is known, claimed to be combatting corruption, an example of chutzpah-squared by someone who treats the state treasury as his own.)

Faced with rising public dissatisfaction over shortages, delays, rampant inflation — who would imagine that pouring trillions of dollars into the economy would cause that!? — President Joe Biden called Uncle Sam’s buds in Riyadh and asked the Saudis to increase oil production. Whined the president: “The idea that Russia and Saudi Arabia and other major producers are not going to pump more oil so people can have gasoline to get to and from work, for example, is not right.”

Of course, this had an immediate impact in Riyadh. MbS felt ashamed at having taken advantage of the American people and announced that he planned to double oil production. Then he lauded the president’s articulate and persuasive case.

Only kidding! MbS had a good laugh and told Biden to take a long hike in the desert. The Saudis said there would be no change in policy as they watched their bank vaults rapidly fill. Far from looking like a dominant superpower, Washington came off as a weakling supplicant.

In fact, America’s ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia long have been a great embarrassment. The libertine, licentious royals publicly play the role of ascetic Muslims at home, then fly airplanes filled with family elites abroad to enjoy a sybaritic lifestyle of which the rest of us could only dream. All paid for by the people left at home whose resources are being looted by one of the few absolute monarchies left on earth.

For decades American presidents have cravenly sought favor in Riyadh, apparently believing that the Saudis would stop selling the U.S. oil without the sickening hand-holding, kowtowing, and sword-dancing. However, the regime survives only by buying protection. Cash is spread at home to pacify a population with less liberty than people in China, Iran, and Russia and, according to Freedom House, approaching the levels of those in North Korea and Eritrea.

The State Department's annual human rights assessment is devastating:

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful killings; executions for nonviolent offenses; forced disappearances; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of prisoners and detainees by government agents; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners or detainees; serious restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including threats of violence or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, censorship, site blocking, and engaging in harassment and intimidation against Saudi dissidents living abroad; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to choose their government peacefully through free and fair elections; violence and discrimination against women, although new women's rights initiatives were implemented; trafficking in persons; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity; and restrictions on workers' freedom of association, including prohibition of trade unions and collective bargaining.

The Trump administration's worst moment was when the president acted as MbS's consligiere, shielding the latter from the consequences of ordering the murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist then living in America. Ironically, Khashoggi, who I met, was noteworthy for publicly trimming his criticism of the royals. However, that wasn't enough for Crown Prince "Slice 'n Dice," who left America's reputation for supporting human rights in about the same condition as Khashoggi's body after MbS's factotums concluded their assignment.

Religious liberty also is absent in the Kingdom, long designated a Country of Particular Concern. Only the practice of Islam is legal. In recent years the royals have ostentatiously manipulated evangelicals, hosting visiting delegations and winning bizarrely warm praise from a herd of Christian Walter Durantys.

Although MbS dropped hints about allowing Christian worship in the future, the regime remains closed to other faiths. Reported State:

The law criminalizes "the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form," "any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam," publications that "contradict the provisions of Islamic law," and other acts including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and proselytizing by a non-Muslim. In practice, there is some limited tolerance of private, non-Islamic religious exercise, but religious practices at variance with the government-promoted form of Sunni Islam remained vulnerable to detention, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

The KSA's international policy is no better. The national guard assures regime survival while the military is mostly for play, a showcase of faux manhood for the idle rich. In Yemen the Saudis have proved to be capable of little more than hitting civilian targets and slaughtering noncombatants. Modern U.S. aircraft are purchased — but not to provide for a competent military. Rather, abundant arms purchases are the equivalent of rental payments for the American military to act as bodyguards for a royal kleptocracy which the Saudi public won't die for. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates once observed, the Saudis always are ready to “fight the Iranians to the last American.”

Unfortunately, Uncle Sam's submissiveness grew to Brobdingnagian proportions under the Trump administration. Riyadh was President Donald Trump's first foreign destination, where he peered into the Sauronesque orb at the national terrorism center. Like the once good wizard Saruman, Trump then fell under the spell of a modern Sauron, a corrupt, extremist regime he had once denounced. Among the KSA's recent crimes: kidnapping Lebanon's prime minister, supporting extremist and dubious insurgents in Syria and Libya, underwriting brutally repressive regimes in Bahrain and Egypt, isolating and threatening to invade Qatar, and attacking Yemen.

The only redeeming quality of the Saudi activity is the royal regime's striking incompetence. Indeed, as an ally the Kingdom performs about as well as Italy, which in past wars did more harm to its allies than its adversaries. (Eight decades later one still must marvel at Italy's disastrous invasion of Greece.) Riyadh was forced to release the Lebanese premier, failed to oust Syria's President Bashar al-Assad or push the much-reviled Khalifa Haftar into power in Libya. The war against Yemen, a largely internal affair which the Kingdom's foolish meddling turned into a sectarian contest, was supposed to last a few weeks but is entering its seventh year. The result has been a humanitarian disaster. Only in fastening awful dictatorships atop the Egyptian and Bahraini people has the Saudi regime been particularly successful.

It is long past time to end the endless bipartisan — or tripartisan, counting American evangelicals — suck up to the Saudi royals. The Middle East no longer matters much to America. The U.S. is awash with energy and Israel is a regional superpower capable of defending itself. Saudi Arabia matters even less.

Washington shouldn't turn Riyadh into an enemy, of course. However, the U.S. should treat the Kingdom as a normal country, expected to provide for its own security and be accountable for its misbehavior. American policymakers need to see this antediluvian dictatorship plainly and act accordingly. No more pandering to one of the world's most vile and ruthless kleptocracies.

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