

One Small Handshake for the United States, One Giant Leap for U.S.-Saudi Relations

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Articles & Testimony

President Biden has a powerful moral imperative for ending his feud with the crown prince: to ensure that the kingdom's gradual pivot away from extremism doesn't falter.

Should President Biden visit Saudi Arabia and shake hands with its crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, the alleged mastermind behind the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi? The answer is yes. Indeed, there is a powerful moral imperative to do so.

The debate over the proposed Biden visit is frequently framed as pitting principle against realism. On one side stands the president's disgust at Khashoggi's grisly dismemberment, which prompted Biden to label MBS (as the Saudi royal is known) as a pariah. On the other side looms a national average of \$5 per gallon of gasoline, a price that threatens to worsen the Democrats' already gloomy November electoral prospects.

Biden needs to swallow his pride, the argument goes, and offer MBS his personal get-out-of-purgatory card in exchange for a Saudi agreement to pump more oil. The White House has announced dates for a mid-July trip, but judging from Biden's recent strained comment that despite their paths necessarily crossing at an international gathering in Jeddah, he was not going there to meet MBS, the president's reluctance is palpable.

I have great sympathy for this view. Khashoggi's fall from Saudi grace was, to a certain extent, born in the conference room at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the think tank I direct. That is where he appeared on a televised panel two days after the 2016 election and said that Trump's victory would be terrible for Arab interests, an assessment that ran directly counter to the official Saudi view. Within days, he was fired from his editorial position in Saudi media and began to transition from being a tolerated gadfly to enemy of the state. For years, I have wondered how Khashoggi's fate—and the fate of the U.S.-Saudi relationship—might have been different if I had

invited another commentator to speak that day.

But as significant as Khashoggi's killing was, reluctance to engage and thereby legitimize the leader allegedly responsible for it—as well as other violations of human rights within the kingdom—is not the only moral issue at stake in U.S.-Saudi relations today. We need to enlarge our aperture to recognize that there is something bigger going on in Saudi Arabia that is profoundly relevant on both moral and strategic grounds.

What is so important to U.S. interests that it not only merits Biden's travel to the kingdom but demands it? It is the fundamental decision by the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to end its support and funding of Islamist radicalism, to stop its decades-long export of extremist ideology, and to focus instead on a positive agenda of human development at home and the development of a relationship toward Muslims around the world that urges them to have a healthy respect for the laws and norms of the countries in which they live. This is huge.

A word of context: One of the great ironies of Saudi history is that the most serious threat to a state founded on strict adherence to the precepts of Islam has been the wrath of Muslims even stricter, more dogmatic, and more fanatic in their faith than the Saudis. At times, this meant confronting the threat; at other times, this meant accommodating the threat. Dating from at least the 1979 takeover of the Mecca mosque by the ideological forebears of Osama bin Laden, Saudi strategy has tried to outflank the extremists by outdoing them, financing people and institutions that rivaled the extremists in their extremism. In reality, this was a protection racket that required the kingdom to pay an ever greater price to stay just one step ahead of the radicals. As such, it was doomed to failure—and when all those young Saudi men rammed jetliners into the World Trade Center towers, it failed in horrific fashion.

Extricating themselves from the grip of extremism has been, for Saudis, an agonizingly slow process. The two most dramatic changes have come in the last five years, since King Salman elevated his son Muhammad as crown prince.

First is a dramatic sociocultural-economic reorientation of domestic Saudi life designed to unleash the human resources of the Saudi population—female and male—so that the kingdom can eventually survive the transition to a non-oil-based economy. Second, is an equally dramatic foreign policy shift away from supporting a worldwide network of extremist mosques and madrasas and toward advocating the idea that Muslims around the world should prioritize loyalty to the countries in which they live over fealty to some transnational Islam. Here, what is novel is that instead of merely abjuring reprehensible behavior, MBS has replaced it with a positive agenda.

These revolutionary changes, both of which are manifestly in America's interests, are giant steps in the right direction—but they are only that. They are in their formative stages, with a long way to go. They are reversible, especially if conservative forces—currently quiescent—prove to be more powerful and cunning than they appear. And they are top-down initiatives, pursued by a leader who is both visionary and mercurial.

So, yes, President Biden, go to Saudi Arabia and shake MBS' hand. But don't go to bend the knee in exchange for some additional barrels of oil and a few cents off at the pump. Rather, go to put your hand around MBS' shoulder, to congratulate him on the vital but still incomplete steps he has taken to drag the kingdom from the 7th to the 21st century, and urge him to continue the job. And if you want to counsel him to complement social and economic openness with political openness, go for it. After all our country has been through these past twenty-one years, isn't the real moral imperative not to shun MBS but to do everything in your power as President to ensure that the Saudi Arabia of tomorrow is definitively, conclusively, and irretrievably different than the Saudi Arabia of the past?

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the American Purpose website \(https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/saudi-arabia/\)](https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/saudi-arabia/). ❖

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