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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# *America Needs Saudi Self-Defense*

Without interceptors for Riyadh, America risks making Iran stronger and driving oil prices up.

By Karen Elliott House

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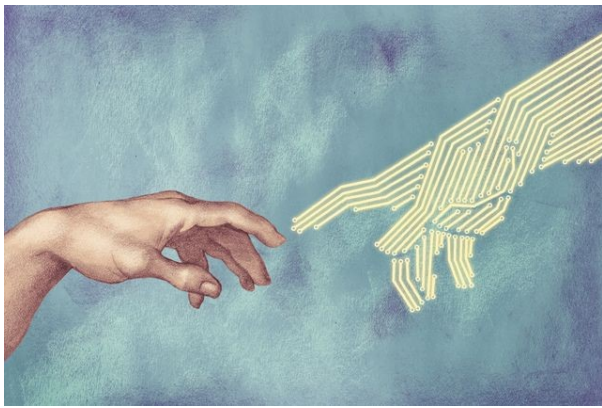
Saudi soldiers from an artillery unit stand behind a pile of ammunition close to the Yemen border in Saudi Arabia, April 13, 2015.

PHOTO: FAYEZ NURELDINE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Saudi Arabia is begging the U.S. for Patriot interceptors to defend itself against drone and missile attacks from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. The Biden administration's reluctance to provide them is wrong for three reasons. First, it endangers the Saudi people, who look to the U.S. for protection. Second, it endangers an ally and benefits Iran. Third, it is politically self-destructive for President Biden: It risks higher oil prices if missiles from Yemen hit Saudi oil fields.

Why would Mr. Biden deny an essential defensive capability to a long term ally? One Saudi theory is that he and his progressive allies are intent on punishing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for his alleged role in the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Another is that Mr. Biden is so desperate to pass his Build Back

Better legislation that he dare not risk a single vote by Democrats offended by Riyadh's human-rights record. Either puts progressive virtue signaling ahead of statesmanship.



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The threat to Saudi Arabia is real. The [Journal reports](#) that the Houthis have conducted 375 cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia this year. This Monday Saudi air defenses intercepted a ballistic missile over the capital. In March the Houthis unsuccessfully attacked a major Saudi oil port. A sophisticated attack on Saudi Aramco's oil facilities in September 2019 forced a brief suspension of half of Saudi oil production.

Mr. Biden's continued refusal even to speak to the crown prince, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, is petty. Mr. Biden speaks via Zoom to China's Xi Jinping and Russia's [Vladimir Putin](#), both of whom have human-rights record

at least as bad as Saudi Arabia's. And despite Iran's horrendous human-rights record, the president seeks to revive a failed nuclear deal even as Tehran shuts out international nuclear inspectors and continues to produce enriched uranium.

The hostility toward Saudi Arabia comes at a time when the kingdom is moving in all the directions of modernization advocated by a succession of U.S. presidents. Once the most austere of Islamic societies, strictly segregating men and women, Saudi Arabia has unleashed a breathtaking societal transformation in the past few years. Young men and women mix freely in restaurants and coffee shops; women drive, work alongside men in government offices, and no longer need a male guardian's permission to leave the country.

A country that banned movie theaters until 2018 now hosts Justin Bieber concerts, Formula One races, international golf tournaments and female sports

teams. The crown prince plans to diversify the economy, reducing its dependence on oil by attracting foreign investment and know-how. To do so, he believes, the kingdom must be a place where foreigners and young Saudis want to live and work. So the once-powerful religious authorities have been reduced to mouthpieces for the regime, forbidden to harass the populace.

To continue this modernizing path, the kingdom needs stability. Efforts to build a tourism industry along the Red Sea, for instance, won't succeed if Saudi territory is constantly threatened with attack. The U.S. has nothing to gain by distancing itself from Saudi Arabia and thereby encouraging Iran to step up its decadeslong effort to weaken Riyadh, undermine the royal family, and lay claim to Islam's holiest sites and Arabia's oil.

*Ms. House, a former publisher of The Wall Street Journal, is author of "On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—and Future."*

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