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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Biden's Saudi Arabia Visit Was Worse Than an Embarrassment

The president's 24 hours in Jeddah were dominated by photos of his fist bump with Mohammed bin Salman. Things went downhill from there.

By Karen Elliott House

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and U.S. President Joe Biden during the Jeddah Security and Development Summit in Jeddah, July 16.

PHOTO: BANDAR AL-JALOUD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Meetings between leaders of important nations are usually worthwhile even if they yield no immediate results. But there are exceptions. One was Neville Chamberlain's 1938 Munich meeting with Hitler. Another: President Biden's sit-down with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman last week.

The president's 24 hours in Jeddah were dominated by photos of his fist bump with the de facto leader of a kingdom Mr. Biden had labeled a pariah. Things went downhill from there. Mr. Biden insisted that, in front of the entire U.S. and Saudi delegations, he had labeled the crown prince the killer of Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi

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Joe Biden Heads to Israel and Saudi Arabia



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Minister of State Adel al-Jubeir was quick to say he didn't recall hearing that. When Mr. Biden was asked if the foreign minister was telling the truth, he said no—implying that a key Saudi official was a liar. Even the [New York Times](#) questioned if Mr. Biden's account was accurate, noting that he has a history of describing events other meeting participants don't recall.

So much for rebuilding U.S.-Saudi cooperation, which was Mr. Biden's goal.

This trip was worse than a missed opportunity. It damaged U.S. security interests in the Middle East by highlighting to the world that neither Saudi Arabia nor other Gulf states trust the U.S. enough to make any sacrifices to renew badly frayed relations. In a speech to Arab leaders, the president proclaimed: “We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran.”

That fell on doubting ears from a man they watched walk away from Afghanistan. The United Arab Emirates promptly announced its effort to return an ambassador to Tehran and resolve differences diplomatically. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud contradicted Mr. Biden's claims of enhancing Saudi-Israel relations, and reiterated that any increased oil production won't be a Saudi decision but one by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus, which includes Russia. That's a not-so-subtle way of saying Saudi will maintain its warming relations with [Vladimir Putin](#) regardless of what the U.S. thinks.

In short, the president walked away with no progress—not only on oil, but on peace in Yemen, confronting Iran and everything else. That failure was compounded by the risible way the White House handled the visit. The White House staffer who thought a banal buddy-to-buddy fist bump was preferable to a customary formal handshake should be fired. It had nothing to do with Covid; the president shook hands with other Saudis and also, earlier, with Israelis and Palestinians. If he thought that forgoing a handshake would appease anti-Saudi critics in his own party, he was wrong. Rep. Adam Schiff blasted the fist bump as

“visible proof of the continuing grip oil rich autocrats have on U.S. foreign policy.”

It's easy to blame the press for emphasizing these embarrassments, and Mr. Biden did. But without any substance to report, it's hardly surprising that reporters focused on the spectacle of Mr. Biden squirming uncomfortably in the bed he had made with his earlier bravado about punishing Crown Prince Mohammed. And the president couldn't have expected them to be fooled by White House efforts to tout as breakthroughs incremental changes in Saudi-Israeli overflight arrangements or a long-agreed transfer of two tiny islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia with Israel's blessings.

Mr. Biden went to the region at a moment when the world faces enormous economic and security risks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is causing food shortages and price increases that will only worsen as Ukraine's inability to export its grain and plant a new crop ripples across the world. Destabilizing migration flows from poor countries in Africa and the Mideast such as Egypt, which depend heavily on Ukrainian wheat, will follow. Inflation, already a world-wide problem, seems sure to get worse unless China's economic slowdown produces a global recession, something that will hurt every nation including the U.S.

Hanging over all of this is Mr. Putin's continued nuclear threat. Daily the risk grows that Russia's ally in Tehran will complete its own bomb. International experts believe Iran already has enough enriched uranium to build at least one bomb. Mr. Biden and Israel's Prime Minister Yair Lapid pledged again that Iran will not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons. “The only way to stop them is to put a credible military threat on the table,” Mr. Lapid said. But Mr. Biden hasn't done that. For 18 months he has begged Tehran to forgo nuclear weapons while turning a blind eye to its violation of economic sanctions, its mischief in neighboring nations, and its support of Houthi rebel attacks on Saudi Arabia. He affirmed on this trip he'll keep chasing that chimera of negotiations.

His determination to conciliate an implacable foe is another similarity to Chamberlain. Let's hope it doesn't produce a similar result in a year.

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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