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OPINION | GLOBAL VIEW

# *Slouching to Saudi Arabia*

Biden's reluctant decision to visit MBS will reset a vital strategic relationship.



By

[Walter Russell Mead](#) [Follow](#)

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Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery and oil terminal in Saudi Arabia, May 21, 2018.

PHOTO: AHMED JADALLAH/REUTERS

Future American officials should carefully study the evolution of the Biden administration's approach to Saudi Arabia. It's a textbook example of the damage that good intentions can do when linked with weak analysis. Yet the universe is sometimes forgiving. Even after the latest flurry of gaffes, strong and serious leadership from President Biden can put a vital relationship back on its feet.

Democratic opposition to the U.S.-Saudi relationship began soon after Franklin D. Roosevelt met with King Abdul Aziz aboard the Navy heavy cruiser USS Quincy in 1945. The Eisenhower administration's preference for good relations with the Arab world over support for Israel struck many contemporary Democrats as a favor to American oil companies heavily invested in the kingdom. The Organization of the

Petroleum Exporting Countries' predatory pricing during the 1970s made Arabs generally—and Saudis especially—unpopular. Saudi treatment of women infuriated American feminists, and as climate activists grew more influential in Democratic politics, Saudi oil was seen as a threat to the planet. The Saudi origins of the 9/11 bombers combined with the close ties between the Bush family and the Saudi royals taught a new generation of Democratic activists to loathe the House of Saud.

More recently Saudi tactics in the war in Yemen, the murder of Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi opposition to any thaw in U.S.-Iran relations, and the kingdom's friendly relations with [Donald Trump](#) and Jared Kushner sealed Saudi Arabia's permanent status as a least-favored nation among American Democrats.

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Candidate Biden's rhetoric and, until recently, President Biden's policy reflected this long and strong tradition in American politics. Candidate Biden vowed to make Saudi Arabia an international pariah. Mr. Biden did his best to shame Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (widely known as MBS) for the brutal and foolish Khashoggi murder. On issue after issue, the Biden administration's Middle East policy stood in clear opposition to Saudi goals.

Reviving the nuclear deal with Iran, a move that would inevitably boost Tehran's regional power by ending its economic isolation, was the centerpiece of Mr. Biden's regional agenda. The Americans demanded an end to Saudi participation in the war against Iranian proxies in Yemen, threatened to reduce arms sales to Saudi and its allies, and trumpeted American intentions to wreck the fossil-fuel industry, which is the foundation of Saudi wealth.

But even as the Biden administration boasted of its principled stance against Saudi wrongdoing, a horrible realization was slowly dawning on the White House. Every administration discovers that some of its pet theories about the world turn out to be wrong. Team Biden has gradually learned that almost all the key foreign-policy

ideas it brought to the White House don't work. Iran wasn't eager to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Russia wasn't willing to be sidelined.

Climate activism and human-rights advocacy turned out not to be a viable foundation for American foreign policy in an era of geopolitical conflict. The mix of sanctions against Russia, tariffs on China, anti-fossil-fuel regulatory activism and multitrillion-dollar spending bills ignited a firestorm of inflation. As gasoline prices spiked upward and drove the president's polls down, the key to Joe Biden's political future fell into the hands of a crown prince he'd insulted and disdained.

And so, like the desperate and outmaneuvered Emperor Henry IV in 1077, who went to Canossa to perform penance before an offended Pope Gregory VII, Mr. Biden swallowed the bitter pill and announced he would go to Saudi Arabia and meet MBS.

That news infuriated human-rights and climate activists both inside and outside the administration. Asked about the meeting by reporters last Friday, Mr. Biden fudged. "I'm not going to meet MBS," he said. "I'm going to an international meeting and he's going to be part of it." On Sunday Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told CNN that there would be a one-on-one meeting between the prince and the president; the White House appears, sort of, to have denied this.

Atmospherics aside, the failure of his Iran policy ironically offers Mr. Biden a chance to reset the Saudi relationship. While the administration waited and prayed, Iran steadily accelerated its progress toward a nuclear breakout and refused to re-enter the nuclear deal on terms that even a strongly motivated American president can accept. That leaves Mr. Biden no choice; he must tighten security ties with Israel and the Gulf states against a relentlessly hostile Iran. The Saudis want stronger defense ties as much as the Biden administration needs them. That common security interest can be the basis for a renewed partnership. And by arguing that increased Saudi oil production will help isolate Iran and cut its revenue, Mr. Biden may just be able to persuade MBS to pump some more crude.

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