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OPINION | COMMENTARY

U.S.-Saudi Relations Finally Start to Thaw

The overdue nomination of an ambassador suggests this vital strategic alliance can get back on track.

By Karen Elliott House

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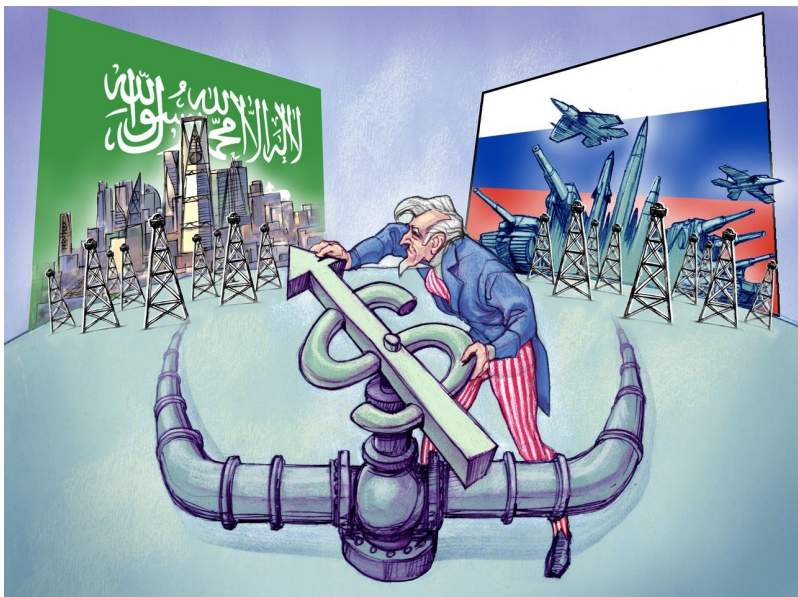


ILLUSTRATION: DAVID KLEIN

President Biden and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman may not like each other, but they desperately need each other—and time for rapprochement is running out.

Imagine for a moment that Saudi oil suddenly disappears from world markets—or its supply is severely curbed. The immediate effects would be massively higher prices at the pump, further collapse of the Democrats' bleak prospects at the polls, disruption of the crown prince's modernization agenda, and a greatly emboldened axis of Russia, China and Iran. Both Iran and Russia, with China their silent partner, have strong incentives—and real capabilities—to make this scenario a reality and force the world to lift embargoes against their oil sales.

This scenario isn't far-fetched. In September 2019, 50% of Saudi oil production

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was shut down by a missile attack from Iranian allies in Yemen. In recent years Iranian missiles have fired on oil tankers in both the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, the two main routes for Saudi oil tankers supplying the world. The third route, through the Suez Canal, was briefly blocked last year when a tanker ran aground. Iran and Russia are fully capable of initiating any of these plots. Intriguingly, Iran ensured last summer the ability to export its oil by opening a

new pipeline to the Indian Ocean.

With oil already at \$100 a barrel, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have reason to do everything possible to prevent the disruption of Saudi supply. That means the two nations must return to the security-for-oil relationship that began nearly eight decades ago with Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud. That relationship lasted, despite ups and downs, through 14 U.S. presidencies until Mr. Biden. As a candidate Mr. Biden, reacting largely to the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, branded the entire Saudi state a “pariah.” As president, he doubled down on insults by refusing even to speak to Crown Prince Mohammed, 36, who rules the kingdom for his elderly and infirm father, King Salman. Not surprisingly the crown prince has refused to help Mr. Biden by pumping more oil.

While the U.S. isn’t dependent on Saudi oil thanks to domestic production increases under President Trump, European allies are. Unless Europe finds other oil sources, it will continue buying Russian oil and funding [Vladimir Putin’s](#) war machine.

If the West wants to break Mr. Putin before the North Atlantic Treaty Organization breaks under the strain of high oil prices and inflation, Mr. Biden must persuade Saudi Arabia to boost production. Saudi Arabia’s 1.2 million barrels a day of spare capacity is double that of the United Arab Emirates, the other Gulf nation that could help were it not also offended by Mr. Biden’s inattention to its security. Sooner rather than later, the president and the crown

prince must cooperate on a new strategy that protects Saudi oil fields, and thus Saudi security, from Iran. In exchange the Saudis would increase production to save European nations from energy shortages and almost certainly a recession that could unravel their cooperation against Russia.

Something of a mating dance between Washington and Riyadh appears to be taking place behind closed doors. The Journal reported this week that Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns visited the crown prince in Riyadh in April. Saudi Arabia has announced a two-month cease-fire in its seven-year war with Yemen, which has cost Riyadh about \$350 billion and outraged human-rights activists world-wide. A peace deal would be a win for Saudi Arabia but also could be presented as at least a small success for Mr. Biden, who has pledged to end that war.

The president has at last ended his 15-month diplomatic snub by naming a U.S. ambassador to Riyadh: Michael Ratney, a career diplomat with experience in Israel. Riyadh and Jerusalem cooperate unofficially to contain Iran, but the U.S. hopes Mr. Ratney can help transform those ties into full diplomatic relations, opening the tantalizing possibility of Saudi access to a secure pipeline that would carry its oil from the Red Sea through Israel directly to the Mediterranean and thus Europe.

Opponents are working to thwart any improvement in U.S.-Saudi relations. China, the kingdom's largest oil customer, is wooing Saudi Arabia with weapons sales and soon a visit by President Xi Jinping. At the same time some 30 progressive Democrats in Congress—critically (and hypocritically) focused on human rights—have signed a letter protesting a rapprochement with the kingdom. These same progressives, who also claim to be warriors for green energy, seem unconcerned that their opposition to oil is forcing the world to rely more on coal, an even dirtier fossil fuel. Coal is 56% of China's total energy consumption, and its use in the U.S. and Europe rose by double digits last year.

What the Biden administration and its progressive supporters need to realize is that Mohammed bin Salman is likely to rule Saudi Arabia for many decades—half a century if he lives to 86, his father's age. He is exceptionally popular with Saudis 35 and under—70% of the Kingdom's citizens. Gone are the repressive religious police who strictly enforced segregation of the sexes for four decades. Women

drive, work with men in government and the private sector, and now travel without a male companion. Once-forbidden entertainment abounds—movie theaters, music, rock concerts, women’s sports.

The lifestyle changes enhance his domestic popularity and are essential to attract Western money and minds to the kingdom. His ambition to transform Saudi Arabia into a modern technological leader won’t be realized absent Saudi security. Foreign investment and expertise won’t come if missiles or desperate migrants from neighboring nations are a constant threat.

While the world needs Saudi oil, the crown prince needs the West—and the security that only the U.S. can provide.

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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