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OPINIONCOMMENTARY

Both Sides Lose in the U.S.-Saudi Feud

Washington and Riyadh need each other and would benefit if Biden and Mohammed bin Salman quieted down for a while.

/ Karen Elliott House

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes President Joe Biden at the Al-Salam Palace in Jeddah, July 15.

PHOTO: SAUDI PRESS AGENCY/ZUMA PRESS

Silence is golden. Said to be an old Arab proverb, this is good advice to both the U.S. and Saudi governments if they are to preserve any possibility of salvaging a security relationship more important now than when it began eight decades ago.

The West is invested in the war in Ukraine and could easily become embroiled in new hot conflicts with China and Iran before President Biden's term ends. Oil prices in the U.S. are roughly \$90 a barrel and could double if Russia decides to stop pumping oil or if Europe carries out its threat to ban imports of Russian crude by sea after Dec. 5.

Even as this global nightmare lurks, Mr. Biden and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are engaged in a public brawl over oil that endangers the security of both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. What began as political posturing by Candidate Biden—who vowed to make the kingdom a “pariah state” because he believed the crown prince was complicit in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi—has become a bitterly personal feud between the two leaders. And as they engage in new rounds of retribution, enemies like Iran are taking notice. A U.S. National

Security Council spokesman confirmed Tuesday that the military is on high alert for a possible imminent Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Oil Minister Prince Abdul Aziz bin Salman, a half-brother of the crown prince, issued a chilling Oct. 25 warning about the future of oil: “It is my profound duty to make clear to the world that using emergency stocks may become painful in the months to come.” He was alluding to Mr. Biden’s continued draw-down of the U.S. strategic petroleum reserve in a vain effort to reduce gasoline prices and win votes for Democrats in next week’s midterm elections. The stockpile, created in 1975 to protect the U.S. against sudden supply disruptions, is at its lowest volume in 40 years. In recent months the president has withdrawn nearly a third of what it contained when he took office.

Exactly what the Saudis are planning isn’t clear. But early December will be a decisive moment for global supplies as the oil cartel, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, meets again Dec. 4—the day before Europe’s threatened bans on importing, financing or insuring Russian oil shipments, even to third countries like China and India, go into effect.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia now are like a furious couple in the midst of a divorce. The misunderstandings are so deep and public that their feud isn’t likely to heal until a new president moves into the White House. Both nations continue to air their grievances, which stir up the U.S. and Saudi publics. The Saudis insist they were prepared to overlook Mr. Biden’s pariah talk during the campaign. But once in office, he continued to accuse the crown prince. Worse, Mr. Biden cut arms sales to the Saudis even as he removed their Iran-backed Houthi attackers in Yemen from the U.S. terrorist list. Things went downhill from there.

In July, with oil prices and inflation rising precipitously in the U.S., Mr. Biden visited Saudi Arabia. Although he denied that he was looking for additional oil production, everyone knew that was simply spin. The State Department confidently told skeptics like me that the Saudis would raise production in the fall. But the president emerged from his meeting to brag that he had accused Crown Prince Mohammed to his face of approving Khashoggi’s murder.

Rather than increase production, the kingdom on Oct. 5 agreed with the oil cartel to cut it. U.S. officials accused the Saudis of reneging on a deal. Mr. Biden loudly and publicly promised “consequences,” including a review of arms sales. Things escalated further when the Journal reported last week that the crown prince has

privately been making fun of Mr. Biden's gaffes and questioning his mental acuity.

The U.S.-Saudi leadership war has gotten out of hand. Even during the 1973 embargo, the kingdom made sure the U.S. military had all the oil it needed. After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush and King Abdullah worked to keep the vital relationship on track. A similar attitude is needed now.

The Saudi government has the right to make a priority of high oil revenue, which funds its expensive economic reform plans. But the kingdom's leaders shouldn't be surprised if some Americans see that decision as unmindful—if not ungrateful. After all, the U.S. literally saved the Saudi oil fields from Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War.

It was also in America's interest not to have Saddam controlling the Middle East's oil resources. But that's the point: The U.S. and Saudi Arabia shared—and still share—an interest in Mideast security and oil supplies. With Russia, China and Iran all plotting how to take advantage of the U.S., which they view as a declining power, it's imperative that Riyadh and Washington try to restore their relationship through quiet and wise diplomacy. If the U.S. wants more Saudi oil, it must address Saudi security concerns about Iran and stop courting Tehran.

The kingdom can't possibly believe that closer relations with China and Russia will guarantee its security. And the U.S. can't seriously think green energy is ready to replace oil. The Bible and the Quran both extol the virtue of silence. Joe Biden and Mohammed bin Salman would both be wise to go quiet for a while.

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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