

Opinion **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia and the US are drifting back on to the rocks

Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman is no friend to Biden's America

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Joe Biden greets Mohammed bin Salman during a visit to Jeddah in July. The crown prince has made clear his hostility to lectures from western liberals © Reuters

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Joe Biden was forced to swallow his pride when he visited Saudi Arabia in July to fist-bump Mohammed bin Salman. Though he opened himself to accusations of hypocrisy after having branded the kingdom a pariah, Biden's embarrassment would have been worth the gain if it had undercut Vladimir Putin's Russia. No such result has been visible. Saudi Arabia's autocratic crown prince seems to have moved closer to Putin since then. The question is whether there is anything Biden can do to dissuade Saudi Arabia from being a recurring thorn in America's side.

The implicit Saudi answer to that is yes — as long as Biden is replaced by a different president, preferably Donald Trump. The Saudi crown prince's ties to Trump's family are as intimate as his disdain for the Biden administration is obvious. Saudi Arabia is thus now part of a select group of countries that roots for one of America's parties over the other. This includes Putin's Russia, Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Israel when Benjamin Netanyahu is its prime minister. In the new world disorder, America's openness can often be its Achilles heel.

There are three reasons to think Prince Mohammed's [Saudi Arabia](#) will pose a growing problem for Biden's America. The first is financial. Biden's most pressing challenge is to ensure the recent oil price fall does not go into reverse. That drop, which curbed Putin's dollar earnings and improved Democratic chances in the upcoming midterm elections, had little to do with Saudi Arabia. It was mostly driven

...following market recovery, but due to the Saudi market's recovery, which is mostly driven by China's economic slowdown. After Biden's visit, Prince Mohammed agreed to lift Saudi daily output by a token 236,000 barrels. But he and Putin earlier this month agreed to cut a third of that from the "Opec plus" quota. Further cuts are likely. The Saudis prefer it when oil is more than \$100 a barrel. Prince Mohammed's motive may be more monetary than geopolitical. But collateral damage to Biden is a bonus.

The second is the crown prince's hostility to lectures from western liberals. Biden's rhetorical contrast with Trump is like night and day. Biden divides the world into autocracies and democracies. Trump, whose first presidential trip abroad was to Saudi Arabia, has a predilection for strongmen. Prince Mohammed is fast becoming the autocrat's autocrat. That is almost certainly why he opted out of Queen Elizabeth's funeral on Monday. Skirting the protesters would have been awkward. Saudi Arabia's [recent jailing](#) of two women activists for posting dissenting views on social media shows how little Prince Mohammed cares about Biden's concerns. Both sentences — 45 years and 34 years — were extreme even by the standards of strongmen and could easily have been avoided. The crown prince seems to be making a point that Biden's values hold no sway.

The final reason is that Prince Mohammed viscerally prefers a Trumpian [US foreign policy](#) to Biden's. The crown prince's ties to Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, go far deeper than their WhatsApp friendship. Last year Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund invested \$2bn in Kushner's private equity company even though Kushner's sole prior experience was in his family's real estate business.

A Saudi screening panel found Kushner's operations to be "unsatisfactory in all aspects". But it was overruled by Prince Mohammed. This probably saved Kushner's venture. The Saudi fund accounts for most of its capital. Congress is investigating the deal. Kushner strongly defended Prince Mohammed after US intelligence agencies expressed "high confidence" that the crown prince ordered the operation that led to the gruesome 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and dissident. For Prince Mohammed, \$2bn is a small risk to take for a huge potential return if Trump and his family regain the White House.

Biden's frustration is that there is not much he can do to alter Prince Mohammed's calculus. The west's renewed clean energy ambitions threaten Saudi Arabia's bottom line, as well as Russia's. Most forecasts say fossil fuels will go into secular decline within the next ten years. It should be little surprise that the Saudis and other exporters want to squeeze what they can while it lasts. They have no shortage of customers, China at the forefront. When President Xi Jinping makes his expected state visit to Saudi Arabia later this year, he will doubtless exchange warm

state visit to Saudi Arabia later this year, he will doubtless exchange warm handshakes on the red carpet.

The headaches the Gulf's ruthless young autocrat create for Biden's America are specific to him and generic. Prince Mohammed stands out as one of the world's most single-minded absolutists. Yet he also puts a face on the once-pliable areas of the world that no longer pretend to like America's rules.

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