

# Johnson's cap-in-hand appeal for Saudi Arabia and UAE to increase oil supplies fails

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With the US/NATO-provoked war in Ukraine and associated sanctions causing a devastating shortage of oil on world markets, pushing up prices to \$130 a barrel, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson went to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) begging them to pump out more oil.

Johnson is desperate to avoid a repeat of the 1970s energy crisis that saw oil prices soar, corporate bankruptcies and bitter class struggles that brought down the Conservative government in February 1974.

His visit this week exposes the hypocrisy and cynicism of the British government whose foreign policy is dressed in claims about protecting democracy, human rights and national sovereignty, while committing and courting the perpetrators of some of the world's greatest crimes. It comes just days after the House of Saud, a long-time US and UK ally, executed 81 prisoners, the largest mass execution for decades. The despotic regime had tortured the unnamed prisoners, denying them even the semblance of a public trial or legal representation.

Their crime? According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, 41 of the victims, Shias from Saudi Arabia's oil-producing Eastern Province, had taken part in anti-government protests in 2011-12.

Days earlier, Johnson had praised Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for promising to modernise the justice system, only begging the question whether beheadings were to be replaced with a firing squad. While Johnson was in Riyadh, three people were executed, bringing the total this year to 100.

The Saudi-led coalition that includes the UAE, backed and militarily supported by the US and Britain, has been waging a criminal war on Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, since April 2015 in a bid to

suppress the Houthi-led insurgency that toppled Saudis' puppet regime. Countless war crimes have been committed through the indiscriminate bombing of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

The UN has estimated that the war had killed 377,000 people by the end of 2021 directly and indirectly due to hunger and disease. Of 31.9 million people in Yemen, 23.4 million need humanitarian assistance, of which 12.9 million are in acute need, with 161,000 people likely to experience famine later this year.

None of this counts for anything. As far as Johnson is concerned, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are our "key international partners."

In a break with tradition, journalists did not accompany him on his trip, indicating Johnson's desire to ward off any awkward questions. In recent weeks, he has been travelling with just one broadcaster and a journalist from the newswires.

Johnson had to make the trip to Riyadh because the British government is no longer able to call on the disgraced Prince Andrew, their go-to man for behind-the-scenes business relations in the Gulf. The prince is in disgrace over his close relationship with convicted US sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein and the legal case brought against him in New York by Virginia Giuffre.

Johnson has close relations with bin Salman. In 2018, when he was foreign secretary, he praised him as a reformer who "deserves our support... I believe that the crown prince, who is only 32, has demonstrated by word and deed that he aims to guide Saudi Arabia in a more open direction."

A few days before the gruesome murder and dismembering of former regime insider turned dissident Jamal Khashoggi, which even US intelligence agencies concluded was approved by bin Salman, Johnson accepted a £14,000 trip to Saudi Arabia from the

country's foreign affairs ministry.

His courtship of bin Salman is part of efforts to attract more Saudi investment in Britain and seal a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council in keeping with his post-Brexit plans for a "global Britain." To this end, bin Salman sent Johnson a text asking him to intervene to ensure that the proposed £300 million takeover by a Saudi-led consortium of the Premier League football club Newcastle United went ahead, despite the Premier League's "wrong" decision not to allow it. The Premier League "corrected" its decision after "undertakings" that the Saudi government would not control the club.

Last week, highlighting official cynicism over Ukraine, Newcastle played Chelsea, the club facing possible bankruptcy following sanctions imposed on Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer sought to make political capital out of the whole affair, lambasting Johnson for "going cap in hand from dictator" and switching reliance on Russian oil to Saudi oil. But he singularly failed to demand Johnson cancel his trip.

Johnson's trip was in the end fruitless. When asked whether Riyadh had agreed to increase output to tackle soaring crude oil prices, he replied, "I think you'd need to talk to the Saudis about that."

He said, in response to a journalist's question about the executions, "I always raise human rights issues, as British prime ministers before me have done, time after time. It's best if the details of those conversations are kept private, they're more effective that way."

Johnson's trip to the Gulf despots comes days after the government announced it would end the import of Russian oil by the end of this year—Russia provides 18 percent of Britain's diesel—and was considering whether to extend the ban to Russian gas, making up 4 percent of Britain's supplies. The government's new energy "independence" plan will be published later this month and is expected to place increased reliance on renewable energy, nuclear energy and boosting production in North Sea gas and oil fields that have been winding down production.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Johnson said ending reliance on Russian energy would be "painful," meaning expensive. It is workers and their families who will have to pay the direct and indirect costs of the

US/NATO war.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the only oil producers from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with spare capacity, are in no mood to increase supplies. The world shortage provides an opportunity to refill their coffers after recent lean years.

The incoming Biden administration had sought to distance itself from bin Salman over the killing of Khashoggi in October 2018 and civilian casualties in his war in Yemen. It has removed the Houthis from its global terror list while London has thus far failed to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation. Washington is also trying to resuscitate the 2015 nuclear accords with Iran, the Sunni Arab states' long-time foe. At the end of last year, in what appeared a snub to its Gulf allies, Downing Street transferred the responsibilities of the Foreign Office Middle East Minister to the Minister for Asia.

Since late 2016, OPEC has been coordinating oil production decisions with Russia, enabling Moscow to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to keep the lid on oil supplies, limiting the monthly increase to 400,000 barrels a day, while Riyadh is considering pricing some of its oil sales to China in yuan instead of the US dollar.

It is in order to find alternative supplies of oil that Johnson has made overtures to Iran, finally agreeing to repay the £400 million refund due to Tehran after Britain cancelled its order for tanks and armoured vehicles after the toppling of the Shah's regime in 1979, in the process finally securing the return to Britain of dual-nationals Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori after years of detention in Iranian jails.

While the media has focused on whether the government in effect paid a ransom for their release, London and Washington are indicating their preparedness to drop sanctions on Iran's oil exports, at least for the time being, to create some distance between Tehran and Moscow and to boost the world's oil supplies.



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