

American imperialism meets its blood-soaked clients in the Middle East

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There may not be a photograph today of US President Joe Biden shaking hands with Saudi despot Mohammed bin Salman. The press has been largely excluded from the Saudi leg of Biden's four-day trip to the Middle East, and Biden's aides have announced a new protocol limiting Biden to exchanging fist bumps, not handshakes or hugs, supposedly due to the greatly accelerated spread of the Omicron BA.5 subvariant of the coronavirus.

There is good reason to believe that this policy has nothing to do with any new health concerns for the 79-year-old president. The White House desires to reduce the amount of attention given to Biden's embrace of a notoriously bloodstained murderer. He is courting bin Salman in an effort to obtain a sizeable increase in Saudi oil production, both to ease the pressure on NATO countries from the cutoff of Russian supplies as a byproduct of the war in Ukraine and to defuse social discontent in the US itself, where gas prices have soared to nearly \$5 a gallon.

It is his first trip as president to the region where American imperialism has carried out its bloodiest crimes over the last three decades, waging wars in Iraq, Syria and Libya, supporting countless military coups and brutal repression by kings and dictators alike. Millions have died and tens of millions have been driven into exile. Biden is not seeking to alleviate the plight of those who have survived imperialist aggression, but rather to add to the number of victims. He is devoting four days to intensive talks with the two most important US allies and client states in the Middle East. He has spent two days in Israel and will spend two more in Saudi Arabia, with the strategic aim of lining up the two countries behind the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, while promising US support for their preparations for war against Iran.

There is also a brief side trip to Ramallah, which has more the character of a slap in the face to the people of occupied Palestine than an acknowledgement of their rights. In relation to the Palestinians, Biden has continued all the measures adopted by the Trump administration: the US embassy, moved from Tel Aviv by Trump, remains in Jerusalem; the US consulate in East Jerusalem, the main point of contact for Palestinians, remains closed; the Palestinian mission in Washington D.C. remains closed; the US continues to demand that the Palestinian Authority cut off all support payments to the families of those murdered by Israeli troops and settlers, which Israel calls "financing terrorism;" and the US has not changed the Trump policy of recognizing the legitimacy of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, in violation of international law.

There is an overpowering element of imperialist hypocrisy in the Biden trip. The US government has been engaged for nearly five months in a war against Russia in Ukraine. It has poured in tens of

billions of dollars in weaponry and deployed covert military forces. The claimed justification for this confrontation—which risks direct military conflict between countries possessing the world's two largest nuclear arsenals—is that the United States is defending freedom, democracy and the right of self-determination of the Ukrainian people, as well as warding off a future Russian threat to America's NATO allies. Yet this policy now leads the president of the United States to embrace two regimes that personify the very crimes that have supposedly justified the US intervention in Ukraine.

The state of Israel was founded on the denial of self-determination for the Palestinian people, indeed, of their very existence. Israel has occupied conquered territory in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights for more than half a century, and it is steadily remaking the character of these areas through the building of settlements and the seizure of Palestinian and Syrian land, in what can only be called ethnic cleansing. Gaza has been aptly described as the largest open-air prison in the world, with the caveat that in most prisons the guards do not regularly fire missiles and rockets and drop bombs on the inmates.

The suppression of the Palestinians' right of self-determination remains Israel's key principle. This was codified during the Trump administration with the passage of a law declaring Israel to be the state of the Jewish people, thus relegating non-Jews—Christians, Muslims, atheists, immigrants of all kinds, as well as the Palestinians—to the status of permanent second-class citizens. Zionists may not like the term, but this is apartheid.

Writing in the *Washington Post* this weekend, Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, bemoaned the fact that in the region extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River (essentially Israel, Gaza and the West Bank), the Palestinian population now outnumbers the Jewish population. "No external threat is as dangerous to the Zionist enterprise as this internal one," he writes.

Fascist elements, particularly among the Israeli settlers, have drawn the conclusion from this demographic fact that the Palestinian population must be drastically reduced in order to reestablish and maintain a Jewish majority, either through mass expulsions, like those carried out in 1947-48, or through mass killings of the type that befell the Jewish population of Nazi-occupied Europe during the Holocaust.

There was no mention of these inconvenient facts in the course of Biden's visit, full of saccharine pledges of unending US support for Israeli democracy.

As for Saudi Arabia, it lacks the parliamentary facade of Israel and is ruled by a tyrant monarch who has become a byword for murder, savage internal repression and genocidal warfare against a small

neighboring country.

Bin Salman's most publicized killing is the assassination of Saudi critic and journalist Jamaal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Khashoggi, by then a US resident and columnist for the *Washington Post*, was lured to the consulate, then murdered by a death squad dispatched by bin Salman. His body was dismembered and disposed of so thoroughly that no trace has been found since.

Inside Saudi Arabia, bin Salman is the latest in a long line of absolute rulers going back to the founder of the Saudi dynasty nearly a century ago. While his aged and invalid father reigns as king, bin Salman as crown prince actually rules, directing the unyielding suppression of democratic rights for all Saudi citizens, enforced with special brutality against women, immigrant workers and members of the oppressed Shi'ite minority.

Earlier this year, 81 men, mostly Shi'ites found "guilty" of advocating for the rights of their religious sect, were beheaded in a mass execution. While the despotism may be medieval, the regime enforces it with the most advanced technology, buying weapons of war from the United States, Britain and other imperialist powers, and surveillance technology developed by Silicon Valley and Israel.

As for trampling on "self-determination" and the rights of small countries to be free of cross-border aggression by their more powerful neighbors, bin Salman puts Vladimir Putin in the shade. Since 2015, Saudi military forces have been engaged in brazen aggression against Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world. In response to an internal revolt that overthrew Saudi puppet ruler Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, troops, warplanes and warships from Saudi Arabia, with US and British technical assistance and armaments, have waged a war of unexampled brutality, creating what UN officials have called the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

Putin's reactionary invasion of Ukraine, triggered by NATO's encirclement of Russia over the previous two decades, has killed thousands of Ukrainians and made millions of them refugees. Bin Salman's invasion of Yemen has been far bloodier. A UN report issued in November 2021 estimated that 377,000 people had been killed, nearly two-thirds of them children under the age of five who died from starvation and disease brought on by the Saudi blockade of food supplies.

Twenty million Yemenis—two-thirds of the entire population—are dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive. Four million are internally displaced. Millions more would have fled the country but for their escape being blocked by Saudi forces, which control Yemen's land borders and maintain a US-backed patrol of the country's sea lanes. The UN report projects that over the next eight years, the death toll will rise to 1.3 million people, while 22 million, the vast majority, will be living in extreme poverty.

Candidate Joe Biden declared that the murder of Khashoggi made Saudi Arabia a "pariah state." He vowed to isolate bin Salman as punishment for this crime. Now he travels to Jeddah to kiss the bloody monarch's ring.

There has been some tut-tutting in the American media about the contortions employed by the White House and State Department to justify the reversal of policy towards bin Salman. This is particularly so in the case of the *Washington Post*, where the murdered Khashoggi was a columnist.

A commentary by *Post* publisher Fred Ryan, published Saturday as an op-ed column, not an official editorial, complained, "Biden's meeting also sends a dangerous message about the value the United States attaches to a free press. A grip-and-grin photograph with [bin

Salman] signals to autocrats everywhere that you can quite literally get away with murdering a journalist as long as you possess a natural resource the United States wants badly enough."

The column did not dispute the foreign policy necessity for a rapprochement with bin Salman, only urging Biden to hand over a list of political prisoners to be released and stage a face-to-face meeting with Saudi dissidents. "It is a way to show that Biden's self-abasement is meant to secure greater human rights, not just cheaper gas at American pumps," Ryan concludes.

The talk of "self-abasement" is entirely beside the point, however. Biden is not lowering himself to bin Salman's level by making his oil-for-blood deal. He is demonstrating the true barbarism and depravity of American imperialism and of himself as its current political leader.

In the meeting of Biden and bin Salman, it is Biden who has the far longer list of crimes against humanity, including mass killings that dwarf the Saudi despot's. Biden has been a leading figure in the US national security establishment for a half century. He helped formulate policy for US wars of aggression as far back as the first Gulf War of 1990-91, which he fully supported in the Senate.

Biden voted for resolutions that authorized the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and supported massive funding for the Pentagon war machine in every one of the 36 years he served in the Senate. Once he became Obama's vice president, he took direct executive responsibility for the US wars or interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia, and for drone missile assassinations over a vast region. Obama made him the administration's point man on Ukraine during the period when the US spent \$5 billion to overthrow the elected pro-Russian president and install a fascist-backed regime in Kiev.

In the meeting between Biden and bin Salman, it is Biden who is the Godfather, guilty of so many crimes that he can barely remember them all. And he heads a military-intelligence apparatus that was carrying out murders just as bestial as those of bin Salman before the cutthroat crown prince was even born.



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