Biden hands blank check to Saudi Arabia in Middle East visit

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Following his two-day trip to Israel, US President Joe Biden arrived in Saudi Arabia's western port city of Jeddah on Friday morning, where the blood-stained murderer Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman greeted him unsmilingly with a fist bump at the Al-Salam Royal Palace. This was a far cry from the traditional greeting by leading members of the ruling family for a US president at the airport.

Following a courtesy call to the aging and infirm King Salman, Biden held "a working session" with bin Salman, the de facto ruler, and his ministers. Although Biden had pledged during his election campaign to treat Saudi Arabia as a "pariah state" due to its appalling human rights record and bin Salman's signing off on Jamal Khashoggi's gruesome assassination in 2018, the pressing needs of Washington's geostrategic interests have taken precedence over his avowed scruples.

On Saturday, he will attend a summit with the leaders of the six Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman—plus Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

Biden's purpose is to reassert Washington's standing with some of the most tyrannical rulers on the planet and line them up behind Washington's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine—justified with the cynical call "to stop mass death and a humanitarian catastrophe." The war has met a decidedly cool response from Israeli and Arab leaders alike.

Biden is also seeking to cement an anti-Iran alliance as part of US imperialism's broader efforts to limit China's expanding economic and political influence in the energy-rich Middle East.

Biden came straight from Israel, a key custodian of US interests in the region, which guarantees it exemption from the human rights standards expected of Washington's opponents. Notwithstanding its parliamentary façade, Israel is distinguished by its apartheid system of rule within its internationally recognized borders, its military suppression of nearly five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and its near daily killing of Palestinians. Israeli security forces have killed at least 60 Palestinians in the first six months of this year. All this goes without a murmur from this "leader of the free world" and promoter-in-chief of "human rights."

The visit to Israel itself was something of a sideshow. Its chief purpose was to present a broader substance to his Middle East tour and limit the widely held view that he was going cap in hand to the Saudis.

Israel's fragile coalition government, made up of a disparate group of eight political parties headed by the rabid right-winger Naftali Bennett and united only in their antipathy towards former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had fallen apart within a year of the Biden administration's brokering. It was the interim prime minister, Yair Lapid, who will hold office till elections on November 1, the fifth in four years, with whom Biden met.

Human rights, self-determination and all the other buzz words never got a mention. In relation to the Palestinians, Biden gave Lapid everything he wanted. There were no demands for a settlement freeze or concessions to the Palestinians. He did not even raise the issue of Israel's assassination of Shireen Abu Akleh, the veteran and widely respected journalist for the Al Jazeera Arabic network, even though she held dual US and Palestinian citizenship. Palestinians were enraged that while US investigators confirmed that the bullet which killed Akleh had been fired by an Israeli soldier as she covered an Israeli raid on Jenin in the West Bank, they said the killing 'was not intentional,' even though she was clearly visible and wearing a press jacket and helmet.

Biden made a quick call to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, where he tossed some loose change at the Palestinians: up to $100 million for the East Jerusalem Hospital Network, an additional $201 million for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and an additional $15 million in food aid via the UN World Food Programme and two NGOs. But he had nothing other than platitudes to say about Israeli-Palestinian relations. Abbas for his part reiterated his willingness to

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resume talks with Israel even though the US allowed Israel to consolidate its occupation of the West Bank.

Biden also held a virtual meeting with leaders from Israel, India and the United Arab Emirates to discuss investment in strategic infrastructure.

His visit ended with the signing of the "Jerusalem Declaration," reaffirming the US commitment to Israel's security. In addition to the $3.8 billion a year in aid that the US gives Israel, Tel Aviv will receive a further $1 billion for its Iron Dome defence shield—developed and built with more than $1.6 billion from the US—to replace the missile interceptors used during last year's 11-day assault on Gaza. He also pledged to provide additional support if exceptional circumstances arise, in effect underwriting any future assaults on Gaza, Lebanon or elsewhere.

While the Declaration reiterated US support for the "two-state solution" and negotiations towards that end, Biden did not even call on Lapid to resume talks with the Palestinians, simply noting at the press conference that he did not expect such a state to emerge "in the near term."

Only in the context of Iran did Biden fail to please Lapid. While the Declaration reaffirmed the US commitment to building an alliance against Iran and its proxies, Biden refused to issue a deadline for the talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal that the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated in 2018, reimposing sanctions, or to draw a "red line" that if crossed by Iran would prompt action.

The Declaration's chief political significance was that it forced Lapid to commit to the US in the war in Ukraine. While not mentioning Russia by name, it says that "The United States and Israel reiterate their concerns regarding the ongoing attacks against Ukraine, their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and affirm the importance of continued humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine."

Just hours before Biden left for Saudi Arabia, Saudi aviation officials announced the country would open its airspace to all air carriers, paving the way for overflights to and from Israel and permitting direct charter flights from Israel for Palestinians travelling for the pilgrimage in Mecca, a move which Biden hailed as a small step toward normalizing relations with Israel, saying, "Saudi Arabia's decision can help build momentum toward Israel's further integration into the region, including with Saudi Arabia."

At the press conference at the end of his visit, Biden declared quite openly that the purpose of his visit to Saudi Arabia was to bolster America's position in the region, which had waned under his watch. He said, "I think we have an opportunity to reassert what I think we made a mistake of walking away from: our influence in the Middle East," and added, "I want to make clear that we can continue to lead in the region and not create a vacuum, a vacuum that is filled by China and/or Russia."

Relations with the Gulf States cooled after President Barack Obama's refusal to back Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak during the mass protests that were to bring down his government in 2011 and threaten Saudi clients in Bahrain and Yemen. Relations became more strained after Washington signed the 2015 nuclear accords with Iran--whom Riyadh and Abu Dhabi accuse of supporting the Houthi rebels who ousted Riyadh's puppet government in Yemen in 2015--and did little to counter missile attacks by the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The Biden administration for its part has been frustrated by Saudi Arabia's refusal to increase oil production and help bring down fuel prices in the wake of Russia's attack on Ukraine, which has increased the likelihood that the Democrats will lose in the mid-term elections in the fall. A quarter of the Kingdom's fuel exports go to China, making it the largest supplier after Russia, and there is talk it is considering accepting Chinese yuan instead of US dollars for its oil sales, undermining the dollar's dominance.

Speaking briefly after his meeting with bin Salman and Saudi officials on Friday afternoon, Biden listed a number of investment agreements that had been formalized, aimed at countering China's economic presence in the Kingdom, describing them as "significant business."

He said that with oil prices dropping in recent days and spare capacity running low, it was unclear how much extra Saudi Arabia could produce and how quickly. The potential outcome of his visit on the energy market would not be felt "for another couple of weeks."

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