

Biden concludes Mideast trip focused on US conflict with Russia, China

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US President Joe Biden rounded off his visit to the Middle East with a series of meetings with Arab leaders on Friday and Saturday. While the meetings repaired relations between Riyadh and Washington, no major breakthroughs were announced, with Biden widely seen as having paid a high price for little return.

The White House purpose was to reassert Washington's standing with the region's bloodthirsty dictators and line them up behind Washington's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The war that Biden has sought to justify as a war for democracy and human rights against autocracy has met a decidedly cool response from leaders throughout the region, with neither the Saudis nor the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signing on to the US/NATO sanctions on Russia.

Biden is also seeking to cement an anti-Iran alliance that would connect air defence systems throughout the region, building on CENTCOM, the US combat command whose base is in Qatar and which covers the Middle East, parts of central Asia, Egypt and the Horn of Africa and has, since early 2021, included Israel.

This line-up is not only directed against Russia. It is part of US imperialism's broader efforts to limit China's expanding economic and political influence in the energy-rich Middle East.

Beijing has become the region's largest trading and investment partner, outstripping both the US and Europe some years ago. According to the American Enterprise Institute, the last 16 years has seen total Chinese investments and construction projects reached \$43.47 billion in Saudi Arabia, \$36.16 billion in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), \$30.05 billion in Iraq, \$11.75 billion in Kuwait, \$7.8 billion in Qatar, \$6.62 billion in Oman, and \$1.42 billion in Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia has agreed wide-ranging trade and investment deals with both China and Russia. In the context of oil, China already is the Kingdom's largest customer, with the Saudis recently agreeing to import Russian oil in order to free up its own production, some of which is consumed domestically, particularly in its desalination

plants, to increase exports.

Egypt, likewise, has extensive agreements with Russia which has started constructing a \$25 billion nuclear reactor, while China is playing a major role in the construction of Egypt's new administrative capital 35 km outside Cairo and has occupied much of the new industrial zone being built along the Suez Canal.

Qatar, which has close economic relations with Iran, is negotiating with China over the development of what will be the world's largest gas field and the multi-year export of its gas to China, while Iran's deal with China includes major investment in infrastructure in exchange for cheaper oil and naval outposts in the Persian Gulf. Iraq has signed a deal with China to build 1,000 schools in the country over the next two years.

At the NATO summit meeting a few weeks ago, Biden's new "strategic concept" for the Western alliance recognized China as a systemic "challenge" and described its policies as coercive and its cyberoperations around the world as malicious. He said that along with Moscow, Beijing was trying to "subvert the rules-based international order." In other words, they were opposed to Washington's political and economic domination.

It was this that led Biden to junk his election pledge to treat Saudi Arabia as a "pariah state" due to its crushing of all internal dissent with mass executions and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman's signing off on the gruesome assassination of Saudi insider turned dissident Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and grovel before the Saudi ruler. That the visit took place at all was seen as an achievement for the Saudis and above all for bin Salman.

When the US president brought up Khashoggi's murder with bin Salman on Friday afternoon, the prince accused Washington of hypocrisy for allowing the shocking abuse of inmates by their US guards at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 and doing nothing about the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed by Israel soldiers while covering an Israeli raid on the West Bank city of Jenin last May. Bin Salman could of course

have itemized a far longer list of human rights crimes committed by US imperialism in the Middle East and beyond that more than match those of the barbaric House of Saud.

On Saturday, at a summit meeting with the leaders of the six Gulf sheikdoms and Egypt, Jordan and Iraq in Saudi Arabia's western port city of Jeddah, Biden said, "We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran," adding "And we'll seek to build on this moment with active, principled American leadership." Such principles evidently include support for the ruthless suppression of all dissent as exemplified by bin Salman and Egypt's military ruler General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

In effect, Biden gave the region's tyrants, all of whom sit atop social volcanoes, a blank check guaranteeing Washington's support against domestic opposition. It was the Obama administration's failure to defend Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak against the mass opposition that brought about his ouster in 2011 that precipitated a sharp deterioration in relations between Washington and its Arab allies.

In his first talks on the second leg of his trip on Friday afternoon, Biden met with bin Salman and Saudi leaders in Jeddah. Despite giving the nod to their client Bahrain to join the US-backed Abraham Accords with Israel, and years of back-channel talks between Riyadh and Jerusalem on security issues, intelligence sharing and trade deals, the Saudis refused to deal openly with Israel unless it agrees to the formation of a Palestinian mini-state as outlined in a 2002 Saudi initiative.

However, the Biden administration did announce the finalization of the agreement to transfer the tiny islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. The two islands control the maritime entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba and thus all shipping to Eilat, Israel's only port with access to the Red Sea. Long claimed by Saudi Arabia, but controlled by Egypt, the islands were subject to the 1978-9 Camp David agreements between US, Egypt and Israel that called for stationing a small "peacekeeping" force there, including US soldiers. The US will pull out its forces by the end of the year.

In return, the Saudis have agreed to allow international flights to and from Israel to fly over Saudi airspace, including the Israeli airline El Al, as well as allowing Israel's Arab Muslim citizens to fly direct to Saudi Arabia for religious visits to Mecca, thereby shortening journey times between Israel and the Middle East and Asia.

Bin Salman gave a vague undertaking to increase oil production by up to 1.5 million barrels a day. This is expected to be a short-term increase that will have little impact on global oil prices. As in 1973, the House of Saud is

determined to take advantage of the oil price increases to refill its coffers after several lean years, fund development projects for the next decade, and assert its own political and economic agenda throughout the region.

The US for its part signed a number of economic deals, including an agreement on cooperation on the development of next generation 5G and 6G mobile technology networks and on cybersecurity, in a bid to limit the economic reach of China's giant Huawei telecoms corporation, which has developed a significant presence in the region.

On Saturday morning, Biden held one-on-one meetings with the leaders assembled for the summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including el-Sisi of Egypt, whom he thanked for "the incredible assistance" in Gaza, which Egypt has promised to help rebuild after Israel's murderous assault on the besieged enclave in May last year. He did not mention el-Sisi's atrocious human rights record that includes the imprisonment of 65,000 of his critics, many of whom have died in custody due to medical negligence, including the democratically elected President Mohamed Mursi.

The summit itself made no substantive announcement on establishing a regional defence alliance nor did it set a schedule for further talks. There was no rush to cement an anti-Iran bloc with Israel by normalizing relations with Tel Aviv, in part because several Gulf States, along with Egypt and Jordan, already trade with Israel, buying its military, intelligence and agricultural technology, and have held joint military exercises via Centcom. Riyadh has already stated it doesn't want to start a war with Iran and is engaged in talks, brokered by Iraq, which is hugely reliant on Iran for electricity and gas, to restore diplomatic relations with Tehran, as is the UAE.

While the participants are in the final analysis dependent upon Washington for their security, they view Russia and China as useful counterweights and bargaining chips in their relations with the US.



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