

The Greatly Exaggerated US Pivot and America's Failures on Human Rights

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For the past several decades, one US administration after another has signaled big plans for a new foreign policy centered on a “pivot to Asia” made possible by a “withdrawal” from the Middle East.¹ With each new administration, Middle East governments and their partisan Washington analysts have interpreted every US move in the region as evidence of a withdrawal already underway, and have pushed back against such alleged efforts with furious, alarmist, and even emotional critiques, describing each move as an “abandonment” of friends that justifies expanded ties between Middle East governments and China or Russia as a natural reactionary hedge.²

In contrast to these tropes, the record amply demonstrates the failure of successive US administrations to carry out plans to withdraw from the Middle East, a failure that is matched only by their record of unkept

1 Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” Brookings Institution, December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

2 Caroline B. Glick, “Biden Abandons Middle East Peace,” *Israel Hayom*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/03/05/biden-abandons-middle-east-peace/>.

promises to prioritize human rights in foreign policy for the region.³ By any measure of security exposures and commitments, including the presence of military troops and bases, kinetic engagement in armed conflicts, arms transfers, and the provision of political, military, and security protection, the United States remains the unmatched goliath in the Middle East, exceeding the cumulative commitments of all other governments in the world combined.⁴

The Biden administration, like others before it, certainly may have believed that a reduction in these commitments would best serve the interests of the American people, and thus started its term with vigorous promises to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia, wrap up both America's "forever war" in Afghanistan and its continued support for the war in Yemen, reduce the exposure of US troops in the region, and even end "blank checks" for Middle East dictators.⁵ The administration admirably took important steps in this direction, most notably withdrawing US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, a move that the American public overwhelmingly supported despite withering criticism from those who were disappointed to see any war end.⁶ It also moved to withdraw some US Patriot missiles that former President Donald Trump had moved into Saudi Arabia and suspended some arms transfers to the kingdom and the United Arab Emirates while announcing a plan to "recalibrate" its

3 Lana Baydas, "Rethinking U.S. Foreign Policy for the Middle East and North Africa," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, October 28, 2021, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/10/28/rethinking-u-s-foreign-policy-for-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

4 On US military presence, see: C. Todd Lopez, "Defense Official Says U.S. Remains Committed to Middle East," *U.S. Department of Defense News*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3417495/defense-official-says-us-remains-committed-to-middle-east/>. On arms sales, see: Bruce Riedel, "It's Time to Stop US Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia," Brookings Institution, February 4, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/04/its-time-to-stop-us-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia/>.

5 On arms sales, see: Riedel, "It's Time." On war, see: Missy Ryan, "As Biden Touts an End to America's 'Forever' Wars, Conflict Drags On Out of Sight," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-wars-afghanistan-iraq-syria/2021/09/22/cc090ff0-1b08-11ec-914a-99d701398e5a_story.html. On Biden's comments, see: Joe Biden, Twitter post, July 12, 2020, 4:59 p.m., <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1282419453939113989>.

6 Ted Van Green and Carroll Doherty, "Majority of U.S Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized for His Handling of Situation," Pew Research Center, August 31, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/>.

relationship with Gulf Arab governments.⁷ The administration did this buttressed by strong disdain from the American public for these states' egregious abuses, from the relentless bombardment of civilians in Yemen to the persecution of journalists and activists at home, punctuated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud's (MBS) murder of US-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.⁸

The most cited "evidence" of US disengagement, however, was the Biden administration's refusal to go to war against the Houthis (and Iran) following a January 17, 2022 drone attack on a UAE fuel depot that killed three migrant workers. Coming as it did on the heels of the Trump administration's refusal to go to war against Iran following a 2019 drone attack on Saudi oil facilities—which the Houthis claimed, but for which Saudi Arabia insisted Iran was responsible—President Joe Biden's inaction cemented a view among the Gulf states and their allies that the US was no longer a reliable partner.⁹

Sullivan's MENA Policy Pillars: No Real Accountability for Human Rights

Instead of any meaningful recalibration—and much less an actual withdrawal or pivot—we find the Biden administration rather desperately trying to amplify its relevance and influence in the region with expanded political, military, and economic support for autocratic regimes. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan gave a speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on May 4, 2023, clarifying the administration's updated priorities for the region by identifying the five pillars of a new framework for US engagement: "partnerships, deterrence, diplomacy and de-escalation,

7 On arms transfers, see: "Yemen: Biden Temporary Freeze of Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE Is Welcome," Amnesty International, January 28, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/01/yemen-biden-temporary-freeze-of-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-and-u.a.e.-is-welcome/>. On the US-Saudi relationship, see: Raf Sanchez, "Biden Looks to Recalibrate Relationship with Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman," *NBC News*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-looks-recalibrate-relationship-saudi-arabia-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-n1258354>.

8 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "US Finds Saudi Crown Prince Approved Khashoggi Murder but Does Not Sanction Him," *The Guardian*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/26/jamal-khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman-us-report>.

9 "Timeline: U.A.E. under Drone, Missile Attacks," *Al Jazeera*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/3/timeline-uae-drone-missile-attacks-houthis-yemen>.; Geoff Brumfiel, "What We Know About The Attack On Saudi Oil Facilities," *National Public Radio*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/19/762065119/what-we-know-about-the-attack-on-saudi-oil-facilities>.

integration, and values,” part of a full-throttle manifesto designed to put the last nail in the coffin of any talk of a Middle East pivot.¹⁰

The Sullivan pillars are, at best, tactics and strategies for the stated goal of a “stable,” “integrated,” and “prosperous” Middle East. The specific American interests underlying these goals remain largely unspoken and only obscurely hinted at. Omitted entirely from the pillars is even a mere mention of the Biden administration’s claimed national security interest in preserving, promoting, and protecting democracies against authoritarianism, as was emphasized in the administration’s two iterations of a much-ballyhooed “democracy summit.”¹¹ The word “democracy” appears nowhere in the Sullivan pillars, other than to describe America’s own imperfect government. As for human rights, Sullivan assures his listeners that the Biden administration will merely “raise concerns.”¹²

Taken together, the pillars describe a coherent policy for the Middle East, but only if one excludes the last, and indeed the flimsiest of the five pillars: values. The interwoven pillars of partnerships, deterrence, and integration reflect a long-standing US approach of seeing the countries in the region as a single zone that must be influenced and integrated within Washington’s orbit or be punished and deterred as enemies. Thankfully, Sullivan does not describe these partnerships as democracies or as countries with which the United States shares values. Nor does he, however, describe them as what they actually are: states headed by unelected tyrannical rulers in most cases, and by an apartheid government in the case of Israel.

Instead, Sullivan identifies the transactional basis of what the US wants from these partnerships: “diversified and resilient supply chains”; “clean energy” (which apparently includes cheap oil and natural gas, obliquely defined as “the stable supply of current energy”); and “solutions on everything from food security to water security” that are central “to the demand signal from countries that are getting entreaties from some of our great power competitors.” This last point obscures US partners’ demands for the “solutions” they really want—weapons and security—in return for

10 Jake Sullivan, “Keynote Address by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/keynote-address-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan>.

11 Ted Galen Carpenter, “The Truth of Biden’s Fraudulent Democracy Summit,” Cato Institute, December 10, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/truth-bidens-fraudulent-democracy-summit>.

12 Jake Sullivan, “Keynote Address.”

keeping China and Russia out.¹³ Excluded from Sullivan's accounting, as is usually the case when it comes to this and other US administrations, is what Israel provides in this transactional partnership framework.

Sullivan claims that expanding and enhancing the integration of the Biden administration's partners in the region "empowers our allies and partners, advances regional peace and prosperity, and reduces the resource demands on the United States."¹⁴ Elements of this proposed integration not only include military, economic, and trade integration, but also the "ultimate, final, complete integration" of Israel into the region and the world via the Abraham Accords.¹⁵ While it is true that expanding the military and economic integration of these abusive authoritarian governments will make them more powerful, Sullivan does not tell his listeners why the US should want to strengthen them, particularly in the context of the existential battle that the Biden administration has declared between democracies and autocracies.

What is far more debatable is the notion that empowering such an axis of authoritarian regimes will bring peace and prosperity. This is a problematic point of view given the Biden administration's argument that peace and prosperity can only result from liberal democracies; after all, if abusive authoritarian regimes can deliver these outcomes then what exactly can the US offer that China cannot? It is also problematic as a matter of fact, given that Biden's Middle East partners remain key sources of violence, war, corruption, and tyranny in the region—hardly a recipe for peace or prosperity.

Sullivan's emphasis on integration decreasing the region's "resource demands on the United States," which alludes to the notion that the increased military integration of America's Middle East partners will make them feel more secure, better protected, and therefore less reliant on US military resources, is no less contentious. The Biden administration may well wish to reduce the presence of human military resources (i.e., troops) in the region and to temper partner demands that the United States use its muscle to support them in their endless conflicts. But there is really no evidence that the US wishes to reduce its weapons sales to the region, which bring great benefit to the defense industry. It is hard not to see at least one outcome, if not the goal, of military integration under a US

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

umbrella being the deepened and expanded reliance of countries under its protection—particularly in terms of necessary US supervision, coordination, interoperable weapons, supplies, and training—making it harder for any of them to break away from America’s influence and control.¹⁶

And while the record shows that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt are indeed diversifying their weapons purchases and business deals—specifically partnering with China and Russia—they are not reducing their demands for US military protection, but are rather using this diversification to exercise reverse leverage on the United States.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia and the UAE are demanding unprecedented bilateral security guarantees from the US in exchange for remaining loyal purchasers of American weapons, and in the case of Saudi Arabia, for normalizing with Israel.¹⁸ An updated assessment on the state of bilateral influence and leverage in 2023 would recognize that the buyers are the ones calling the shots. Hence, we see Sullivan gently and cryptically citing “policy changes in arms sales” when extolling the Biden administration’s early efforts to end the Yemen war.¹⁹

By far the most arrogant and patronizing of Sullivan’s remarks is his faux humility for the administration’s realpolitik framework. The administration’s new “realistic and pragmatic” policies for the Middle East are the product of a “clear-eyed”—and almost sad—acceptance that the US has “been naive about what is possible to achieve in terms of transforming societies by force or by diktat,” and they incorporate “hard lessons learned to eschew grand designs or unrealistic promises of transformational change.”²⁰ What is so discombobulating about this argument is not just the halo it places on past administrations for their noble, if misguided, efforts to transform the region into democratic countries that respect

16 “U.S Power and Influence in the Middle East: Part One,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 8, 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220308_Label_Power_Influence.pdf?VersionId=qfAaWz6OEppfK4GMFshnrrHFIqe4OeN.

17 Paul Iddon, “China Emerges as an Arms Supplier of Choice for Many Middle East Countries, Say Analysts,” *Middle East Eye*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/china-emerges-major-exporter-weapons-middle-east-north-africa>.

18 Jon Hoffman and Sarah Leah Whitson, “Breaking Away From Secret Concessions in the Middle East,” *The American Prospect*, March 28, 2023, <https://prospect.org/world/2023-03-28-secret-concessions-middle-east/>; “Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations With Israel,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>.

19 Jake Sullivan, “Keynote Address.”

20 Ibid.

human rights. Putting aside debating the sincerity or success of US Middle East policies over the past several decades to transform the region, it is worth noting that whatever the efforts, no country in the Middle East today—and certainly not the Biden administration's partners—governs democratically or with a modicum of respect for human rights.²¹

More egregious is Sullivan's absolute punt on responsibility for the harm that results because of the United States' partnerships with some of the world's most abusive governments. In Sullivan's view, replacing grand designs for democracy and human rights (and sweeping away any lingering remnants of Biden's earlier promises in that regard) with expanded partnerships and integration with Middle East despots—apparently the only two options on the table—is a win-win proposition. Sullivan sees no need to account for the costs of US military support and political protection for these governments, thereby enabling, protecting, contributing to, and even profiting from the very human rights abuses about which he assures the world the United States will continue to speak. The lives cut short, the children maimed, the journalists tortured, the schools bombarded, the lands stolen, the homes burned to ashes, the dignity destroyed, and the tens of millions of men and women subject to the tyranny of America's partners never show up in Sullivan's ledger.²² While the United States is able to count its increased corporate profits from deepened economic and defense ties, there is no room in the balance sheet for the costs, because they are supposedly not America's own.

21 "Middle East and North Africa 2022," Amnesty International, undated, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

22 On children, see: Emma Thomasson, "UNICEF Says 10,000 Children Killed or Maimed in Yemen since 2015," *Reuters*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/unicef-says-10000-children-killed-or-maimed-yemen-since-2015-2021-10-19/>. On journalists, see: "The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia," Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, undated, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Journalists/GA72/AmericanDemocracyHumanRightsBahrain.pdf>. On schools, see: "Bombing of Schools by Saudi Arabia-Led Coalition a Flagrant Attack on Future of Yemen's Children," Amnesty International, December 11, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/bombing-of-schools-by-saudi-arabia-led-coalition-in-yemen/>.

Sullivan also fails to even attempt to account for the costs of these deepened partnerships to Biden's national security strategy of protecting democracies to win against the United States' authoritarian rivals. That peoples and governments around the world believe less and less in American rhetoric about the value and importance of democracy and human rights can only be a product of US administrations having repeatedly proven that they do not believe it either, as US policies in the Middle East make clear.²³ We see the immediate costs of such disbelief in the wobbly global support for the war in Ukraine, as many nations are skeptical of the claim that it is principally about preserving international laws and norms, as the Biden administration has claimed.²⁴ Even America's Middle East partners are not persuaded, and are hedging their bets by simultaneously strengthening their ties with Russia, even laundering sanctioned Russian assets and deepening intelligence ties.²⁵ A truly clear-eyed, pragmatic, and realistic approach would take these costs into account.

US Hegemony: Oil, Weapons Sales, and Support for Israel

Not one purported change has happened under the Biden administration; not the pivot, not the withdrawal, not the recalibration, and certainly not the prioritization of human rights. The status quo continued because the administration was ultimately unwilling to demote the long-standing interests that would form the cost of pivoting away from support of powerful Middle East regimes: cheap oil, immunity for Israel, corporate weapons sales, and the broadest interest of all (the belief in which is an article of faith in Washington), US hegemony in the Middle East. There has been no effort by the Biden administration to scrutinize whether these interests serve the American people, despite the occasional concessionary

23 Richard Wike et al., "What People Around the World Like—and Dislike—About American Society and Politics," Pew Research Center, November 1, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/01/what-people-around-the-world-like-and-dislike-about-american-society-and-politics/>.

24 Ted Galen Carpenter, "Ukraine: A War to Save the Rules-Based International Order?," Cato Institute, October 20, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/ukraine-war-save-rules-based-international-order>.

25 Peter Hobson, "From Russia with Gold: U.A.E. Cashes In as Sanctions Bite," *Reuters*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/russia-with-gold-uae-cashes-sanctions-bite-2023-05-25/>; Nomaan Merchant et al., "Leaked US Intel: Russia Operatives Claimed New Ties with U.A.E.," *Associated Press*, April 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/intelligence-leak-russia-U.A.E.-pentagon-9941a3bb88b48d4dbb5218649ea67325>.

nod to the need for clean energy, reduced US military entanglements, and “values” such as those mentioned in Sullivan’s remarks.

The issue that comes closest to being at least a short-term interest of most Americans is cheap oil from the Gulf, in exchange for which the US has for decades provided weapons and protection for petro-rulers. While there have been many oil price skirmishes with Gulf states, the most recent showdown between the Biden administration and the Saudi government was particularly brutish. Faced with spiraling oil prices in the wake of the Ukraine war, Biden appeared in Jeddah on bended knee in July 2022 to reconcile (and exchange a much-mocked fist bump) with MBS, not long after his administration had identified the latter as having ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and had promised to hold him accountable.²⁶ But MBS rebuffed Biden’s pleas for increased oil output, instead hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping just days after Biden’s visit and announcing new deals worth billions between the two nations.²⁷

In October 2022, when the Biden administration grew more desperate to see oil prices come down ahead of the November midterm elections, MBS was able to secure another precious concession that he had been demanding from Biden: the recognition of his diplomatic immunity in lawsuits against him for both the murder of Khashoggi and the attempted murder of Saad al-Jabri and the kidnapping and detention of his children.²⁸ When MBS still refused to increase oil output after this humiliating capitulation, the Biden administration made some renewed noise about “recalibration,” but ultimately did nothing. It was a checkmate for MBS, and was followed by trips to Riyadh by Biden’s most senior officials to beg

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- 26 Fred Ryan, “Biden’s Trip to Saudi Arabia Erodes Our Moral Authority,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/11/biden-saudi-trip-post-publisher-fred-ryan/>.
- 27 On oil, see: Ken Klippenstein, “Saudi Arabia Rejects Biden Plea to Increase Oil Production as Midterms Loom,” *The Intercept*, February 15 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/02/15/saudi-arabia-gas-price-oil/>. On Xi’s visit, see: Aaron David Miller, “Xi’s Saudi Visit Shows Riyadh’s Monogamous Marriage to Washington Is Over,” *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/07/xi-jinping-saudi-arabia-trip-mbs-biden/>.
- 28 “Khashoggi’s Widow and DAWN Sue MBS and Co-Conspirators in US Court for WashPost Journalist’s Murder,” DAWN, October 20, 2020, <https://dawnmena.org/khashoggis-widow-and-dawn-sue-mbs-and-co-conspirators-in-us-court-for-washpost-journalists-murder/>; “Saudi: Case against MBS in US Court ‘Public Relations,’” *Middle East Monitor*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200815-saudi-case-against-mbs-in-us-court-public-relations/>.

his favor, first White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and Special Presidential Coordinator for Global Infrastructure and Energy Security Amos Hochstein, then Jake Sullivan, and most recently Secretary of State Antony Blinken.²⁹

The Biden administration's prioritization of Israeli interests is another important factor impeding designs for a US pivot away from the Middle East, though there is never any explanation as to how Israeli interests serve US interests, and Israel remains excluded from any realpolitik evaluation like those to which America subjects its other global relationships. Instead, Americans are required to accept as an article of faith that the United States' "unconditional support" for and "unbreakable bond" with Israel are based on "shared values" that justify providing the latter with billions in weapons and invaluable political protection from global scrutiny and accountability.

Despite the growing erosion of popular and international support for Israel, US support remains an untouchable anomaly, one that sees the US take on massive liabilities while gaining nothing, not even good will from the Israeli government, in return.³⁰ Although the Biden administration identifies securing Israel's integration in the Middle East by expanding the Abraham Accords as one of its top priorities (based on an argument that doing so will enhance regional peace), it does not bother to explain to the American public why the US must be the one to pay the price for it.³¹ This price not only includes damaging political and economic concessions to Arab states but also a proposed security guarantee and a nuclear power plant for Saudi Arabia. The short-term political interests here—namely continued support from pro-Israel lobbying groups that dictate the continued prioritization of Israeli interests and that ensure the maintenance of Israel's apartheid governance, military occupation, and global

29 Edward Wong and Vivian Nereim, "Blinken's Visit to Saudi Arabia Caps U.S. Effort to Rebuild Ties," *New York Times*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/08/us/politics/blinken-saudi-arabia-crown-prince-biden.html>.

30 Taylor Orth and Kathy Frankovic, "The Share of Americans Who Say the U.S. Favors Israel over Palestine Has Fallen since 2017," YouGov, March 17, 2023, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/international/articles-reports/2023/03/17/who-americans-favor-israel-vs-palestine-poll>.

31 Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, "The Abraham Accords and Israel-U.A.E. Normalization," Chatham House, March 28, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/abraham-accords-and-israel-U.A.E.-normalization>.

immunity—are well-established and well-understood.³² The costs, including keeping America tethered to abusive dictatorships in the Middle East, remain ignored.

Similarly, the baked-in influence of weapons manufacturers has made it difficult for any administration that has talked the talk of curbing weapons transfers to abusive Middle East regimes or decreasing the United States' matchless militarization of the region to walk the walk.³³ Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt are not only the largest weapons purchasers in the world; they are also the largest purchasers of US weapons. And Israel is the world's largest recipient of US military assistance.³⁴ Cutting weapons transfers to these regimes would mean cutting profits to weapons manufacturers, who in turn would cut their campaign donations and their provision of jobs to the officials in the administration doing the cutting. Coupled with the lobbying and financial influence of Middle East governments, the current system of carrots and sticks demands relentless and expanded weapons transfers. And while such an approach well serves corporate profits, no explanation or justification is proffered for how this serves the interests of the American people.

The non-partisan and often unspoken ideology that undergirds each of these interests is a belief in US hegemony as a positive value in and of itself, one that needs no justification, despite the sizeable cost of its maintenance, which is estimated to be between \$65 and \$70 billion annually, not to mention the trillions of dollars spent on US wars.³⁵ America "winning" against China and Russia is defined not merely as containing their bad actions but as maintaining US dominance, even harmful dominance. In this context, it makes perfect sense to maintain military and political support for abusive regimes and to expand their dependence on US

32 "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians," Amnesty International, undated, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/>.

33 Clayton Thomas et al., "Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspective for U.S Policy," Congressional Research Service, updated November 23, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>.

34 Irina Ivanova, "Saudi Arabia is America's No. 1 Weapons Customer," *CBS News*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-arabia-is-the-top-buyer-of-u-s-weapons/>; Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Aid to Israel," Congressional Research Service, updated March 1, 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

35 Justin Logan, "The Case for Withdrawing from the Middle East," *Defense Priorities*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/the-case-for-withdrawing-from-the-middle-east>.

security in the Middle East because, the thinking goes, doing so deters China and Russia from expanding their spheres of influence.

Saudi and Emirati Influence in Washington

The Biden administration's efforts to win its great power competition with China and Russia have contributed to the emergence of a new power axis in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their junior partner, Egypt. The very efforts the US has made to maintain its hegemony in the Middle East have ironically encouraged the development of unprecedented Saudi and Emirati independence and influence in the United States.³⁶ The risks of such influence remain underappreciated.

Measurements of polarity are typically based on "measurable" power in the form of resources, military strength, and economic pull.³⁷ Saudi Arabia's GDP exceeded \$1 trillion for the first time in 2022, and the UAE's reached nearly \$500 billion in 2023, both ahead of many European states.³⁸ Emirati GDP per capita, meanwhile, stands at \$49,450, also ahead of most European nations.³⁹ The unprecedented increase in the wealth of the Gulf states over the past decade, driven by record-high oil prices, has created an apparently bottomless pit of wealth for Gulf economies, and that wealth is expected to grow, even if more slowly than it has previously. Oil still represents one-third of all energy consumed globally, while natural gas accounts for another 24 percent.⁴⁰ With somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of global oil passing through the Strait of Hormuz and the vast majority of spare production capacity held by OPEC states, we can

36 Ben Freeman, "How the U.A.E. Turns Its Interests into US Policy," *Responsible Statecraft*, December 6, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/12/06/how-the-U.A.E.-turns-its-interests-into-us-policy/>.

37 Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>.

38 Salim A. Essaid, "Saudi Arabia's 2022 GDP Breaks Record, Exceeds \$1 Trillion," *Al-Monitor*, March 10, 2023, [https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/saudi-arabias-2022-gdp-breaks-record-exceeds-1-trillion.](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/saudi-arabias-2022-gdp-breaks-record-exceeds-1-trillion.;); "Countries by GDP," PopulationU, undated, <https://www.populationu.com/gen/countries-by-gdp>.

39 "GDP per Capita, Current Prices," International Monetary Fund, undated, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>.

40 Robert Rapier, "Fossil Fuels Still Supply 84 Percent of World Energy—and Other Eye Openers from BP's Annual Review," *Forbes*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2020/06/20/bp-review-new-highs-in-global-energy-consumption-and-carbon-emissions-in-2019/>.

expect to see the Gulf Arab states' purchasing power and influence grow in the foreseeable future.

While these countries are far from acting as a unified EU- or NATO-level bloc, and at times work against each other's interests, their reconciliation with Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, and their negotiations to end the war in Yemen serve the smart and important goal of reducing their conflicts while also shoring up their influence and standing in the region and creating the space to focus on exporting their influence and power. Nevertheless, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have demonstrated uncommon independence and regional maneuvering in the past few years, particularly in their resistance to US pressure on various issues, including, for example, oil prices and the war in Yemen. The UAE has for several years now pursued its own pugilistic foreign policy, at times aligned with the United States, as in Afghanistan, where it actively supported the US war, and at other times at odds with it, as in Libya.⁴¹ More significantly, it has deliberately and openly rebuffed US complaints about expanded Chinese and Russian influence, instead flaunting its developing ties with these countries as another show of its independence.⁴² And both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have become independent sources of influence in military conflicts to whom the US can and does appeal for help, as it is currently doing to quell the conflict in Sudan.

While the UAE has pursued policies of economic diversification, political independence, and regional influence for over a decade, the same approach in Saudi Arabia is new, and should appropriately be attributed to MBS's new, and it must be said, revolutionary and change-driven leadership.⁴³ There is no denying that there is a domestic revolution of sorts underway, one that, but for the brute repression and authoritarian diktat that accompanies it, is quite positive, with reformed laws and an altered judicial system, increased freedom for women, and an unprecedented

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- 41 Bilal Y. Saab, "In Afghanistan, the Gulf Arab States Stepped Up," Middle East Institute, September 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistan-gulf-arab-states-stepped-up>; Ali Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 157–177, <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-uaes-disruptive-policy-in-libya>.
- 42 Alvaro Escalonilla, "Saudi Arabia in the Orbit of China and Russia: Towards a New Strategic Alliance?," *Atalayar*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/saudi-arabia-orbit-china-and-russia-towards-new-strategic-alliance/20230327170255182347.html>.
- 43 Nader Kabbani and Nejla Ben Mimoune, "Economic Diversification in the Gulf: Time to Redouble Efforts," Brookings Institution, January 31, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/economic-diversification-in-the-gulf-time-to-redouble-efforts/>.

openness to foreign art, culture, and business.⁴⁴ As quick studies, the Saudi and UAE governments have absorbed lessons regarding political influence in the United States from the Israel and defense lobbies, but have one-upped them both with exponentially greater spending to infiltrate and influence broad swaths of the American government, economy, and cultural sphere. While there is nothing unique about their efforts, their far greater wealth means that they can buy a lot more influence than anyone else.

Saudi Arabia's spending on American technology, sports, entertainment, gaming, news, film, and the arts has reached unprecedented new levels, not just in purchases for domestic consumption, but in ownership of businesses themselves.⁴⁵ These expanded investments will naturally expand the kingdom's influence on and control over the American economy, making it less likely that a falling-out would occur in the wake of another grave crime, as happened after the Khashoggi murder, when investors pulled more than \$1 billion from the Saudi stock market.⁴⁶

More dangerous is the outright purchase of American government officials. While the defense industry has been renowned for its revolving-door employment of former government officials, who make up a large percentage of defense industry lobbyists, they are no match for the

44 Natasha Turak, "Saudi Arabia Announces Major Legal Reforms, Paving the Way for Codified Law," *CNBC*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/09/saudi-arabia-announces-legal-reforms-paving-the-way-for-codified-law.html>; Megan K. Stack, "The West is Kidding Itself about Women's Freedom in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, August 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-women-rights.html>; Neil King, "Saudi Announces New Cultural Vision, including Residency for International Artists," *Gulf Business*, March 28, 2019, <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudi-announces-new-cultural-vision-including-residency-international-artists/>.

45 Chris Smith, "Saudi Arabia Is Taking Steps That Could Upend the Sports World," *Sports Business Journal*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Journal/Issues/2022/10/31/Portfolio/Saudi-Arabia.aspx>; Sarah Leah Whitson, "How Not to Artwash Saudi Arabia's Gruesome Human Rights Record," *Hyperallergic*, March 14, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/808064/how-to-not-artwash-saudi-arabias-gruesome-human-rights-record/>; Rory Jones, "Flush with Oil Profits, Saudi Arabia Pours \$7.5 Billion into U.S. Stocks from Amazon to Microsoft," *Wall Street Journal*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-fund-spends-oil-windfalls-on-7-5-billion-in-u-s-stocks-from-amazon-to-microsoft-11660645409>.

46 Ben Chapman, "Investors Pull \$1bn Out of Saudi Arabia's Stock Market as Fallout from Jamal Khashoggi Death Deepens," *The Independent*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/saudi-arabia-stock-market-jamal-khashoggi-death-murder-finance-economy-a8595781.html>.

revolving-door buyouts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund has been a particularly useful tool in this regard, with eye-popping payouts to former Trump administration officials, including \$2 billion to former Senior Advisor to Trump Jared Kushner, \$1 billion to former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and unknown millions to Donald Trump himself.⁴⁸ The defense industry also cannot match the eye-popping salaries and business deals that Gulf states are paying to over 500 US military officials, including the 15 former US generals and admirals that Saudi Arabia has been paying as consultants since 2016.⁴⁹

It is not hard to understand how such payouts compromise the integrity, independence, and decision-making of US policymakers, who are naturally counting how much money they could garner if they make decisions that would please their future business partners and employers. While President Biden signed a law prohibiting former intelligence officials from working for foreign governments for 30 months after leaving their jobs, no such laws prohibit civilian or military officials from doing the same.⁵⁰ Moreover, the promise of future rewards to sitting officials is increasingly coupled with direct efforts to influence and bribe election candidates.⁵¹

From the perspective of Middle East countries, which are long accustomed to seeing their government officials bought and sold by external actors, there is nothing new here, and the shoe is now merely on the American foot. From a US perspective, not only does the Gulf Arab states' influence in Washington hinder the ability of elected officials to direct

47 Craig Whitlock and Nate Jones, "Key Findings from the Post's Series on Veterans' Lucrative Foreign Jobs," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/veterans-foreign-jobs-foia-takeaways/>.

48 Adam Klasfeld, "Watchdog Sues for Details about Jared Kushner and Steven Mnuchin's Mideast Travels after Saudis Reportedly Poured Billions into Duo's Funds," *Law and Crime*, October 6, 2022, <https://lawandcrime.com/high-profile/watchdog-sues-for-details-about-jared-kushner-and-steven-mnuchins-mideast-travels-after-saudis-reportedly-poured-billions-into-duos-funds/>; "US: Investigate New Evidence of President Trump's Business Dealings with MBS," *DAWN*, January 15, 2023, <https://dawnmena.org/u-s-investigate-new-evidence-of-president-trumps-business-dealings-with-mbs/>.

49 Craig Whitlock and Nate Jones, "Retired U.S. Generals, Admirals Take Top Jobs with Saudi Crown Prince," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/veterans-us-foreign-jobs-saudi-arabia/>.

50 "US: Investigate."

51 James Bamford, "The Trump Campaign's Collusion With Israel," *The Nation*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/trump-israel-collusion/>.

policies toward the interests of the American people but it constitutes an unprecedented attack on US democracy itself. The United States' Middle East policy under the Biden administration has fallen back in line with the decades-long practice of maintaining support for abusive regimes and contributing to their heinous abuses against the people of the region. The oft-touted US commitment to democracy and human rights is therefore entirely absent from the Middle East.