



Biden is right to visit Saudi Arabia

June 21, 2022 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Middle East

"I'd talk to Iran's leaders," former U.S. diplomat Max Kampelman said over lunch some years back, as the idea of a U.S.-Iranian summit was airing in Washington. "I'd talk to the devil. I just wouldn't give him an inch."

Kampelman, who died in 2013, did lots of talking to U.S. adversaries on Washington's behalf. He led Jimmy Carter's effort to convince the Soviet Union and some of its Eastern European satellites to comply with the Helsinki Accords on human rights, and he led Ronald Reagan's arms control talks with the Soviets.

Kampelman's perspective comes to mind as foreign policy aficionados debate the wisdom of President Biden's upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia — which he had promised to make a "pariah" over human rights — and to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who U.S. intelligence officials have concluded likely ordered the 2018 killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

The question, as Kampelman would have advised, is not whether to meet with MBS, the de facto Saudi leader; presidents talk to the leaders of countries with abominable human rights records all the time. Truman met with Stalin, Kennedy with Khrushchev, Nixon with Mao, Reagan with Gorbachev, and Trump with Kim. The question instead is what Biden should say publicly and privately.

Biden's trip to the region, where he also will visit Israel and the West Bank, comes at a time of regional peril and possibility for Washington.

The U.S.-led talks to revive the 2015 global nuclear agreement with Iran are stalled, raising prospects of a more unsettled region. The chances are growing that the United States, Israel, or both will feel compelled to take military action to cripple Iran's nuclear program. Were Tehran to develop nuclear weaponry, Riyadh, its top Arab rival, would likely move quickly to do the same.

Having said that, the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords of 2020 brought formal diplomatic ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco — and Israel and Saudi Arabia are working ever-more closely together as they seek to thwart Iran's hegemonic designs. A formal Saudi recognition of Israel, which many experts believe is just a matter of time, could super-charge regional efforts to contain Iran and prompt more Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

So, however painful to acknowledge, a nation with a horrific human rights record is key to our interests in the Middle East. But Riyadh needs us as well to help contain Iran and defend the kingdom.

Privately, Biden should reassure MBS of America's commitment to prevent Iran from going nuclear, encourage him to formally recognize Israel, prod him to increase oil production at a time of soaring gas prices, and, however uncomfortably, tell him that no U.S. leader can be silent in the face of human rights abuses. Publicly, Biden should make clear that he spoke forcefully with the crown prince about human rights, if only because his failure to do so would undermine U.S. efforts to promote freedom and democracy and dishearten dissidents and activists all around the world.

In-person meetings are important. They give leaders an opportunity to take the measure of one another in ways that neither Zoom nor phones can provide. Personal relations can create personal understandings that advance progress.

In meeting with MBS, however, Biden also would be wise to avoid the mistakes of his predecessors.

First, Biden must remain clear-eyed about MBS and not succumb to whatever charm he may display.

Truman succumbed a bit to Stalin's charm, describing him privately as "honest" and "smart as hell" at the Potsdam conference of 1945 and saying publicly in 1948, "I like old Joe." Fortunately, that embarrassing flourish didn't reflect Truman's tough-minded policies to contain the Soviets.

Second, Biden must not set unreasonable expectations for himself.

Before Kennedy met with Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961, his top Soviet experts as well as French President Charles de Gaulle told him to expect a blustery, threatening display by the Soviet leader. Nevertheless, a demoralized Kennedy later said he felt "savaged" by Khrushchev and worried that the Soviet leader had found him too "weak" and "stupid" to defend American's global interests.

Third, Biden must be prepared.

After meeting with Kim in Singapore in June 2018, Trump declared that North Korea was no longer a “nuclear threat” — even though Kim did nothing to prove it and committed to nothing beyond what he had previously pledged — thereby giving the North Korean leader a measure of global credibility that he hadn’t earned. Since then, Pyongyang has made considerable progress on its nuclear-related missile program and, this year, began work to complete construction of another nuclear reactor.

However odious the regime on Riyadh, a clear-eyed, sober-minded, prepared Biden can advance U.S. interests when he meets with MBS.