



Biden's Missed Opportunity in Saudi Arabia on Energy

July 17, 2022 **Victoria Coates** *National Review*

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The man sitting to Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman's right in his meeting with President Biden on Friday has gone largely unnoticed in the furor over the proceeding fist-bump. But the prominent placement of Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman was no accident in the Kingdom well-known for its attention to protocol.

Abdulaziz is the half-brother of MBS and was the first member of the royal family to be appointed as minister of energy to oversee the IPO of the Saudi national oil company, Aramco, in 2019. He is also the lead Saudi representative to OPEC, of which the Kingdom is the de facto head. In short, he is one of the most senior and powerful figures in global energy.

In the American delegation across the table, however, there was no equivalent official. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm didn't even make the trip; she was traveling in Asia and tweeting about increasing subsidies for electric vehicles. Instead, President Biden had selected State Department Special Envoy for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein to represent energy issues.

Hochstein's presence sent the Saudis the clear message that any discussion of energy would be in the diplomatic sphere, as had been the traditional posture of the United States as a consuming nation in which the Department of Energy dealt with domestic-energy issues and the Department of State covered international affairs, first and foremost ensuring an adequate supply of imports to the U.S.

There appears to be scant, if any, Biden administration interest in pursuing the more serious discussions of high-level coordination on energy policy between America and Saudi Arabia, two of the world's energy superpowers, that took place during the Trump administration. Such coordination, among other things, took Iranian oil almost entirely off the market with barely a blip in prices. But this time, while Abdulaziz was front and center and ready to talk business, the Americans didn't even bring anyone appropriate to the meeting.

President Biden has insisted on reverting to a consuming posture and refused to take substantive steps to maximize U.S. production while begging Saudi Arabia to turn on the taps and foraging as far afield as Venezuela and Iran for more supply. The Saudis can only interpret this behavior as a lack of seriousness in confronting the global energy crisis and an assumption that the Kingdom will unilaterally shoulder the burden of bringing down prices.

The Crown Prince's announcement at yesterday's Gulf Cooperation Committee meeting that there would be no significant increase in Saudi production should therefore come as no surprise. And anyone hoping that President Biden's sunny prediction that his trip to Saudi Arabia would result in lower prices at the pump in a matter of weeks should not hold their breath.