From Fist Bumps to Missile Fire: One Month since President Biden's Middle East Trip

TRANSCRIPT

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- Bernard Haykel, Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Director of the Institute for Transregional Studies, Princeton University

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Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2142-virtual-event-saudi-arabia-s-china-option-82022

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Michael Doran:

Hi, I'm Mike Doran. I'm a senior fellow and the director of the Center For Peace and Security at the Hudson Institute. This morning, we're having a conversation with Princeton professor Bernard Haykel and Hudson's own Mohammed Alyahya about Saudi Arabia and China and Saudi Arabia and the United States.

This is coming to you on Friday morning. We actually videotaped this on Tuesday morning. So the news that we have last night just before the deadline last night, that's Monday night, Iran answered the take it or leave offer from the EU and behind them the United States regarding the Iranian nuclear program. The Iranians predictably responded to the take it or leave it offer by saying let's, "Negotiate some more." And then predictably, the United States responded that it won't accept any changes to the text but it will accept changes to the form of the text which I take it to be the way the United States renegotiates the take it or leave it offer without admitting that's what it's doing.

Anyway, without any further editorializing, let me get to our guests. Professor Haykel, perhaps you can start us out. Just give us a scene setter. We've got the Chinese leader Xi Jinping coming to Riyadh this week, do we not?

Bernard Haykel:

It's not clear whether it's this week but he will certainly be visiting the kingdom before the end of the year. Saudi-Chinese relations are very good, in fact, excellent. There are all kinds of agreements on oil and energy and mining and even missile development that have been made and the Chinese are opportunistic and they see an opportunity where the US is sending signals to Saudi Arabia, but not just to Saudi Arabia, also to Israel and others, that the US is just not as committed, as interested. That, in fact, the Middle East is a source of endless chagrin and pain for the US and that the focus really ought to be on China. I mean, weirdly, I don't see how you can confront China without, in fact, thinking about the Middle East and engaging it and preventing it from taking over the Middle East.

So the US policy is truly bizarre and very difficult to understand, not at least the desperate attempt to become friends with Iran, a country that is a state sponsor of terror and I just want to remind your audience that Salman Rushdie who is a very close person, friend of mine was attacked and someone tried to kill him and that person is Hezbollah activist and partisan and a big follower of the Supreme leader in Iran. I find it very difficult but that, in fact, would've happened without the knowledge of Iran and its proxies. This is an attack here on US soil, by the way.

Michael Doran:

Can I ask you just to connect up a little bit more explicitly the two threads that you started to unravel there, the thread about China and Saudi Arabia and the thread about the United States and Iran. I certainly think that those two things are related and I think you probably think the same as I do but let me hear you explain the connection between the two.

Bernard Haykel:
So the view that came to dominate during the Obama administration is that the way the US can somehow lessen the load of being in the Middle East was to become friends with Iran, was to strike a deal with Iran. This has been a highly intellectual, impractical, not based on facts, as far as I can tell, view of the world and of the Middle East. It's one that the Biden administration seems to share fully which is that, if you make up with your enemies, somehow you don't need to be as engaged and in the process, the fact that you alienate your strategic allies is not that important. So that's been the view of, I think, the two democratic administrations that we've seen.

The Trump administration had a very different view which is that you side with your strategic allies and you put pressure on your enemies. We're, right now, in a place where the US is desperate to and has been desperate to make up with Iran even though the Iranians refuse to speak to the US, by the way, and all these negotiations, I just need to add that the Iranians refuse to speak directly to the Americans. And so, this kind of constant pattern of humiliation that the US seems to be willing to accept and take, the last of which is the Rushdie murder attempt.

Now, the Chinese see the US and see the Obama view of the Middle East and they see opportunities. They have good relations with both the Iranians and the Saudis. I think on balance, they would much rather be closer to the Saudis than to the Iranians because the Saudis are just simply much more important, strategically, for all kinds of reasons. They're telling the Saudis, "Look, whatever you want, we will do. We will be helpful to you."

Now, we are lucky in the US in that the Saudi elite is very American-centered, American-educated. The Saudi leadership wants to be on good terms with America, would prefer to be allies with America, puts all its money or most of its money invested in the United States so we're basically spurning a partner that wants to be friends, wants to be close, and we're saying, "No, we don't want you to be close," and the Chinese see this and they want to take advantage of it.

Michael Doran:

It's truly mind boggling. Mohammed, let's turn to you. You are uniquely placed to help us understand all this because you are a Saudi national but you've also been educated in the United States so you fully understand how Americans see the world. You fully understand how Saudis see this world. Why don't you start by giving us a sense of what all of this looks like from Riyadh? How are the leaders in Saudi Arabia thinking about the Saudi American relationship while the United States moves toward making this deal with Iran and how do they understand the relationship with China in that context?

Mohammed Alyahya:

Absolutely. I think Bernie made several excellent points some of which I want to build on. Look, I've been reading in some of the analysis that we see that there's an emerging relationship between Saudi Arabia and China. I wouldn't characterize that relationship as an emerging one because it's a longstanding relationship. China is Saudi Arabia's largest trade partner, is the largest buyer of Saudi oil when in the past, it was the United States that was the largest buyer of Saudi oil. It's important to note also on a fundamental level that the Chinese have identical interests to the United States and the relationship with Saudi Arabia when it comes to two very
strategic waterways which are Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. In the same way that the United States views those strategic short points as important for the free flow of energy, for their own economy to fight inflation, etc., etc., the Chinese have the same exact interest and ostensibly, they would also have the same openness to committing resources to securing the stability of those areas.

So that's something that's a strategic overlap between China and Saudi Arabia in the same way as it is a joint strategic goal between the Saudis and the United States. But again, Bernie made an important point about this changing posture in the United States. These signals that are being sent to the region and the signals are that there is a diversion of bandwidth away from the Middle East on its problems towards countering China in East Asia and the South China sea. The problem with that is that when it comes to great power competition, you can't compartmentalize in that way. As we've seen, Ukraine has impact on the Middle East, the Chinese have impact on Middle East, etc., etc. Now, it seems that a Bernie is correct in highlighting that the Chinese view the Middle East and the region has a primary theater for a competition with the United States.

So while the United States is trying to leave that theater in order to compete with China, China's entering that theater in order to compete with the Middle East. They're eyeing military bases. They're trying to get into military industry across the gulf. They see a vacuum, an American vacuum. Now, a lot of the staffers of the Obama administration and this current administration will vehemently deny that there is a vacuum and that there is no commitment to the Middle East. It should be noted that President Biden's speech in Saudi Arabia did reassure a lot of people. It touched on all the right notes and it was an acknowledgement that these anxieties actually do exist for the first time. It was an acknowledgement. We're not leaving the Middle East, we're not withdrawing, etc., etc.

But on the ground, that's what people feel in the region. They feel that the United States is withdrawing. They feel that there is a rebalancing in favor of Iran, right? In Iraq, you've got a failed state with over a hundred Shah militias that to varying degrees are funded by the Iranian regime. In Syria, you've got failed state that doesn't have the integrity of the borders that it used to have in the past. Lebanon is more or less an Iranian satrapy and Yemen is also on the brink of state failure as a result of an Iran backed militia.

So there's an order in the region and it's an order that came after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after Pax Americana after World War II, where there were pillars there. Saudi Arabia was one, Israel was one as well, smaller Gulf countries, Jordan, all of these are components of the structure that the United States has decided is the right security architecture for the region. People in the region are fairly starting to question if the United States doesn't want this architecture anymore. We all live in this area, right? There has to be a structure that comes instead so there's confusion and a lot of questions were answered during President Biden's visit to Riyadh but that doesn't mean that there aren't many others.

Michael Doran:

Bernie, let me take Mohammed's statement about Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia as a basis for which to ask you the next question. There was a lot of commentary over here in the United States that said that Biden significantly altered his frame of reference in the Middle East, that the trip to the Middle East to Saudi Arabia and to Israel was a sign that he had moved away
from some of the fundamental principles that he began with. Namely, he was going to turn Mohammed bin Salman to a pariah, he was going to cut the deal with Iran, the fossil fuel industry is no longer as important as it used to be, and so on. The continued hostility that the Iranian show toward the United States and its allies, the importance of fossil fuels in the security of Europe as shown by the Ukraine crisis, and the importance in general of the Saudi US relationship pushed Biden back to Israel and Saudi Arabia which he had been moving away from. Do you accept that analysis? Is that, in your mind, what happened or are we looking at something else?

**Bernard Haykel:**

So I think that President Biden had been making requests, let's say, or trying to put pressure on the Saudis to increase oil production beginning when the price of oil in the United States started going up which is last year actually, not this year so we're talking 2021 so well before the Ukraine crisis. This was with a view to the elections, the midterm elections in November. The thing that I think a lot of Americans forget when dealing with them, at least, is that Middle Easterners have very long histories and they're not simply thinking about the next election in the next couple months and they don't have the short term-ism.

So as the situation got worse for President Biden because of the war Ukraine and the price of oil and gasoline here at the pump got very high, the desperation increased. I think it was widely seen as an attempt to get the Saudis to increase production through OPEC and OPEC+ that was the purpose of the trip largely. So it was driven by American electoral concerns and this is a pattern by the way, that the Saudis have seen almost every time before an election, some American officials shows up and asks for more oil or if the market is tight. People there are not stupid.

And then, there was all this other stuff that was couched into it. I think what happened with Biden is that he put himself in a corner. This was an own goal, as we say, and he got desperate and then had to go there in person and in so doing, humiliating the United States and showing the US to be weaker than it actually has to be or is. He got very little for it, by the way. The Saudis were very polite in the meetings but they did not agree to increase oil production. In fact, they haven't increased oil production by more than 100,000 barrels in the latest OPEC+ meeting.

So I think Biden has probably internalized that the midterm elections will go badly for him. As you know in American politics, when you lose Congress, the only room for real maneuver for an American president is foreign policy and more activist Biden-informed policy in the last two years of this term. I think some of it has to do with the trip to Saudi and other trips that he will be making. I see the US as having gotten very little for this set of maneuvers and frankly, giving unnecessary offense to the Saudis and to others in the region so it's a very bizarre kind of behavior on the part of the American president.

**Michael Doran:**

Yeah. You've used that word bizarre now a couple of times and I can't say that I disagree with it at all. But let's assume that there are rational actors in the White House and that they had to know in going to Saudi Arabia that the Saudis were not going to change course significantly after all this happened with the United States without the United States coming forward toward
their concerns particularly about Iran. What were they telling themselves in the White House they were going to get from this trip?

**Bernard Haykel:**

I think that they thought maybe they would get more oil and that would help their electoral chances, the Democrats that is. I think there's a lot of pressure from people like the White House Chief of Staff who has an eye on the elections. But what you have in that visit is a lack of long term planning, a lack of strategic thinking, and it's all tactical. The Saudis are not interested in tactical moves or in increasing production to help an American president's political prospects in an election. They're interested in strategic matters namely the threat from Iran, the threat from Iran's proxies like the Houthis and Yemen, the thousands of missiles and drones that have been thrown at them and that are attacking their oil installations, those are real concerns. Those are very concrete, real things. They're not about sentiment analysis of the American public and how they're going to vote in November.

**Michael Doran:**

Right. Right. I'm going to come back to you on the Iran question and the bizarre policy coming from the White House. Mohammed, let me turn back to you. Can you just give us again the view from Riyadh? How was the trip... How did the Saudi elite... What did they think Biden was coming to do and what did they want out of the trip and did they get it or not?

**Mohammed Alyahya:**

Yeah. So to be fair, to be absolutely fair, one of the biggest goals not only for the Saudis but I think for the rest of America's partners in the region for this trip was to understand a little bit more what the United States wants to do and is it still committed to its security architecture or is it not? Do they talk to the Chinese? What do they do with the Russians? I mean, it's important to also remember that the reason that Israelis and the Saudis and the Emirates and everybody else in the region is dealing with the Russians on a strategic level right now is because of the Obama administration policy in Syria, right? I mean, Obama introduced Putin to the region and he made this Russian brokered Syria process a reality where everybody in the region had no choice but to deal with Russia. The alternative to dealing with Russia was dealing with Iran.

That's one of the issues that we saw with the Ukraine war, right? I mean, people in the region feel a little bit spited it as a result of not being included in the negotiations with Iran over the nuclear fire when none of the P5+1 countries are within a range of Iran's ballistic missiles or proxies. So there is a mismatch there and it's an important mismatch.

But further to one of Bernie's points about the amount of investment in the United States, it's extremely deep, the US Saudi relationship, much more so than you read among the commentary at the Washington or the media. Saudi Arabia's hospital systems is based on US technology. A lot of the city planning in Saudi Arabia is literally based on US cities. I mean, Al Khobar is largely based on Houston, Texas. The oil infrastructure uses US technology. There are hundreds of thousands of young people today under thirty who have received their higher education in the United States at elite universities, notwithstanding the other hundreds of thousands of people in the previous generation those over thirty, over forty, over fifty that have gone to school in the United States.
I mean, I come from a family where my father went to school in the United States. I went to school in the United States. All of my siblings went to school in the United States. But what we do see, which is bizarre, and you and I have spoken about the US Saudi relationship and I've spoken at length with Bernie about this, I think it's a foolish idea to think that you can replace the United States wholesale with China. That's not feasible, right?

Ten years ago, fifteen years ago, that would've been an absurd conversation to have. Today, it's no longer an absurd conversation, right? We can have an event like this and actually discuss it rationally but that only tells you the extent to which the Chinese have changed both in their outlook and their capabilities and their technology, etc. Now, people in Saudi Arabia do feel frustrated with the way they are being portrayed in the US media. If you go to young people in Saudi Arabia, a young woman who like one artist or another seeing the front pages of the Washington Post or the New York Times berating the artists for whose concerts they paid good money to attend, right? It causes a very adverse reaction which I think is a problematic one for the United States because these are hundreds of thousands of people that went to school in America-

**Michael Doran:**

Sorry, sorry. Just to make sure your point was clear to our listeners. You’re saying articles berating the artists for performing in Saudi Arabia-

**Mohammed Alyahya:**

For performing in Saudi Arabia, correct. Correct. Among other articles but people feel bullied in Saudi Arabia and I think that's a real loss for the United States because these hundreds of thousands of people that were sent by their own government to go and study in the United States in a dramatic show of confidence in America and its systems. These people are romanticizing China quite naively, right? I speak to a lot of people who are young saying, "We should learn Mandarin and the Chinese don't do this and don't do that." When I answer, I say, "Relationships are difficult. But go to Beijing and see how you feel after two weeks in Beijing." The relationship with the United States is important.

But the point I'm trying to make is, there's a lot of American soft power in the region as a result of its relationship with the government of Saudi Arabia, the military relationship of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia's position in the Islamic world and the Arab world but also a number of Saudi nationals who have gone through the American educational system and to squander all of that because of virtue signaling and because of recent progressive policies. I think it's wasteful. I mean, there are real consequences to that and it's this idea among a bunch of young Saudis that the Chinese are better and let's all pivot to China.

**Michael Doran:**

Bernie, Mohammed wrote a brilliant article. Don't tell him that I think it was brilliant but he wrote a brilliant article recently expounding on some of the points that he just made. Basically, obviously I'm paraphrasing here, basically saying, "Look, there are two different visions of the future that today before Arab youth, Middle Eastern youth, one of them is represented by Iran and one of them is represented by Mohammed bin Salman," which is not the way I think most American newspaper readers say college students are used to seeing Mohammed bin Salman.
My takeaway from Mohammed’s article is that the United States in foreign policy terms, in strategic terms, I’m not just talking about soft power but in strategic terms, when Biden came into power, he had a choice between the path that Donald Trump had been following which as you mentioned which was to contain Iran on the ground, try to prevent it from getting a nuclear weapon, working with the coalition of Arab states’ interest and Israel’s interest in those outcomes. But also, one that pointed toward normalization between the Arab states and Israel through the Abraham Accords.

The other alternative was to normalize with Iran which represents all of the worst elements in the Middle East are either direct allies of Iran or they are aligned with Iran and I would include Al Qaeda and ISIS on this. We don’t need to go into... That could take us down a rabbit hole but I think that the strategic vector of radical Sunni Islam and of Iran is really quite parallel. There are a few areas where there’s friction but for the most part, they’re moving in the same direction.

And so, we could present a whole new picture of the region and how it interacts with the rest of the world and one that would isolate Iran and instead we chose to build up Iran. I wonder if you, Bernie, coming to us, you’re not just an analyst in the Middle East for us but you’re also a person who has very courageously gone out to that very strange land which is American academia and you’ve decided as a pioneer to build a house in that strange landscape. And so, I wonder, could you explain to us how the American academia is understanding all this? Because I think maybe that'll give us a little bit of an insight into the world view of the Biden administration.

Bernard Haykel:

Yeah. So, I mean, look, one way to think about this in very simple terms is that a country like Saudi Arabia or a country like Israel are status quo powers. By status quo powers, I mean that they want American influence to remain dominant, to remain important in the world, in general, and in the Middle East in particular, okay? A country like Iran is a revolutionary power, is a power that would like to see the United States expelled from the Middle East and destroyed all over the world, right? So in that sense, Iran is a lot like North Korea and Saudi Arabia is a lot like South Korea. Imagine if the United States sided with North Korea against South Korea which is the signals that the Obama administration and the Biden administration have been making in the Middle East, is we're going to side with our enemy and we're going to turn our back to our friends. It's a very strange way to think about politics and about geopolitics and strategy.

I think that the part of the reason for this view of the Middle East does come from American academia and from Western academia. You have to remember that most academics are very influenced by Marxism, very influenced by leftist ideologies, they think America is a force of evil in the world. Therefore, by definition, anyone who is opposed to the United States, any country that's opposed to the United States must be a force for good. You see this for instance in almost zero criticism of the Assad regime by academics, almost no criticism of Iran, and always criticizing America’s allies in the Middle East and around the world.

So I think this comes and I hinted at it, I said that the Obama view is a kind of hyper intellectualized view that comes out of academia that has this knee jerk view and perspective that the US is just a bad actor in the world. We live in a strange universe in which our friends
and allies in the Middle East are telling us, by which I mean Saudi, the UAE, Israel and others, telling Americans, "No, no. You're good actually. You're good. Believe me, you're good."

**Michael Doran:**

As you roam the halls of the Ivy league, Bernie, do your colleagues ever come up to you and whisper you to you that I agree with you, we should support friends and punish enemies or?

**Bernard Haykel:**

No. There are very few because there's a lot of group think. Also, these people are engaged in networks of mutual support and you have to, as you know from Marxism, you're either a card carrying member of the party or you're an enemy of the people.

**Michael Doran:**

I spent enough time in academia to learn that. It's not possible to sit quietly in the corner and just do your work. You have to stand up and testify in public.

**Bernard Haykel:**

That's right.

**Michael Doran:**

So Mohamed, let me summarize or slightly interpret something you said a minute ago and get your reaction to my interpretation because you mentioned that you can't substitute China for the United States and ten years ago, nobody would even suggest that but now you have to have this conversation all the time. I think that structurally... Let's forget for a second. Let's forget what the mindset and the outlook of the Saudi elite and the Saudi public is. Let's just say, structurally, I also think it's true that there isn't a China option for Saudi Arabia or the UAE at this moment.

By that, I mean, in terms of the global contest between the United States and China, we're not yet at a point that is analogous to where the United States and the Soviet Union were, say, in 1956. By that, I mean in 1956, Nasser of Egypt could turn to Moscow and Moscow could deliver massive arms and the superpower patronage that would protect Nasser from any counter moves by the United States, by the Soviet Union's rival.

We don't have an example yet of China offering that kind of military diplomatic support to an ally. I mean, China doesn't even really have any allies so that model for China hasn't been tested yet. However, we're seeing the Chinese move into areas of hard power that were unthinkable just a few years ago. When I worked in the White House which was 2005 to 2007, our reigning assumption was that the Chinese had no interest in anything to do with the hard power contest in the Middle East because that would put them on opposite sides of conflicts and they want to be okay with everybody and they want to trade.

All they want to do is extract resources and trade with the countries of the region. They don't want to get mired in any of the conflicts. But increasingly, we're seeing them get into the hard power arena quietly. Again, not in the form that the Soviet Union did in 1956. So the option isn't there yet as a clear cut path but we're getting a lot closer and I wonder if you could explain to us
how you think the Saudi elite is thinking about that in particular with respect to the hard power threat that Iran represents to the kingdom.

Mohammed Alyahya:

Yeah. I think that's an excellent question. I think your characterization when you were in the White House was a fair characterization. Because at that point in time, China was a mercantilist power that was looking to make money, to invest in infrastructure, away from hard power of course and strategic aims. But in 2017, they built their first base abroad in Djibouti. Also, I think China has changed unbelievably over the past fifteen years. At one point in time, people would doubt whether China would ever have the technology to create flat screen televisions in 2004 and 2005 and 2006, right? People doubted that the Koreans could do it and now, the Koreans are beating the Japanese on many fronts. China's 5G system has proven that it is... I mean, there might be issues with other purposes that they use it for but Huawei's 5G system is an extremely advanced 5G system.

China's created an electric car that is fully Chinese. Chinese military industry has improved by leaps and bounds over the past seven or eight years by itself, right? China is starting to have these strategic conversations with people. It's testing the water, it's putting its toes in the water, and seeing how things might work. So I agree, this discussion is one that we can have today when in the past we couldn't have it.

Is it tested? Is China acting like the Soviet Union acted in the past? No. Is there capacity for that? I think yes. Now, in terms of is China an option, I think China is an option but the question is, is it the good option? I think the best option today is for all of America's partners is for there to be a strong America, an America that leads technologically, that leads militarily, that leads politically. That ensures that the piece that it created in the aftermath of World War II and after the Cold War is a piece that remains as a status quo around the world that remains.

Now, the biggest threat to that status quo today is not of course Soviet Union or Russia or other American adversities, it is in fact China. You're right. The Chinese have not built an alliance system that is analogous to the American alliance system by a long shot. But that's precisely what they're trying to do today, I think, in their outreach, diplomatically and strategically to other actors. I think Bernie in the beginning was right. China's almost like a gentleman sitting two tables down in the restaurant saying, "Whenever you want to talk over there, this is what we have to offer". There's no strings attached to our military sales or technological transfers and we don't ask many questions that make you uncomfortable, right? You do your own thing and we do our own. That's what's changing and God knows what China will look like in five years or ten years or what their strategic competitors will become or what their capabilities are, what they can sell and what they can buy.

Michael Doran:

Bernie, if you were going to advise President Biden about what to do to make sure that the China option doesn't become a lot more real, a lot more tangible a lot quicker, what would you tell him to do? What should he have should said to Mohammed bin Salman when he visited that he didn't say?

Bernard Haykel:
Well, I mean, I think that offering protection, military protection, ironclad guaranteed military protection would be very important. Also, I think many Americans and many Westerners don't quite understand that protecting Saudi Arabia is not just protecting Saudi Arabia, it's protecting actually global energy resources. It's protecting ourselves, right? What we don't want is for a power either like Iran through its proxies or China, for that matter, that doesn't think of the world in the way we do.

In other words, that wouldn't use... They would use oil as a weapon. The Saudis don't use oil as a weapon. They think of it as an economic... It's a commodity that is traded. I mean, it's that world that we need to protect and I'm not sure that a Biden has given sufficient guarantees or fully understood what's at stake. I mean, I think now with the war in Ukraine, that's concentrated the mind a bit of Western elites and American elites. But frankly, even in the Biden administration, there's only one person that seems to understand energy and that's Amos Hochstein. Everyone else around the Biden doesn't seem to understand how the global energy market works and the role that the Saudis and OPEC and OPEC+ play. So there's been a real focus on domestic issues and allowing domestic debates to influence foreign policy in ways that have been detrimental and continue to be detrimental to American interests.

Michael Doran:

Let me take a position that is unusual for me. I want to defend Joe Biden for a moment as an intellectual exercise and nothing else.

If I were him and I had heard what you just said, I could say the following, "Well, you know Bernie, when I went to Saudi Arabia, I had to, as you, yourself, said a minute ago, I had to eat a lot of crow because I came in and I took this position saying that I was going to turn the country and its de facto ruler into a pariah and I made a lot of statements that suggested that we were quickly going to move away from fossil fuels to a net zero future and I then encountered reality. In other words, I aligned myself with the progressives in the United States and I adopted a fully progressive foreign policy and then I realized that wasn't going to work. And so, I went to Saudi Arabia. Yes, I didn't get that much tangible from the Saudis but I opened up a window not controlled by the progressives for a discussion with the Saudis and the Israelis about the future of the region. Isn't that something that's a little bit valuable?"

Bernard Haykel:

So I would say, yes, Biden has reset or at least attempted a reset at the relationship and effectively has admitted that he was smoking some really weird stuff before and that he won't be smoking it again when it comes to the Saudis and the Israelis. But look, immediately, what have the Iranians done? They've reopened the JCPOA issue and that's a test, right? For the whole Obama doctrine about Iran and we'll see whether the Americans will stick to their guns and say, "No, we will not re-enter this agreement because of this, that, and the other," or as I suspect will most likely happen, the Americans will re-enter the agreement and we will see a removal of many sanctions. There already has been actually a lot. The many sanctions have already been removed kind of sotto voce in secret and so on. But they will remove a lot of sanctions and Iran will be flushed with tens of billions of dollars which will not, in fact, help anybody in the region and certainly will undermine any guarantees he may have given to the Saudi leadership on this last trip.
Michael Doran:

Well, that brings an end to my effort to see the world through the eyes of Joe Biden because I couldn't agree with you more of course. Mohammed, how about you? If you were... I realize this is not your job as a Saudi national but as a friend of the US Saudi relationship, if you found yourself alone in a room with Joe Biden and his top advisors and you wanted to suggest to them things that they could do, knowing full well, you understand the political context in which he's operating, the pressures that are on him from his own left and so forth, if you wanted to offer some concrete advice about how to put the US Saudi relationship on a much healthier basis, what would you suggest to him?

Mohammed Alyahya:

Well, look, as a small tangent, if you remember in February of 2022, the United States purchased more Russian oil that month than in any month on record before that. It was in February 2022 when the Americans were criticizing the Israelis and the Saudis for not doing enough to counter Russia as punishment for its invasion of Ukraine. Now, I don't blame the United States for buying all of that Russian oil because people need their cars to go to work and people need to heat their homes and cook. That's a physical need in a physical world and the systems we have are ones that require energy. As Bernie mentioned, there's an energy market that exists and that's how things work. The issue with the discourse on the region and indeed, also on Russia and other places is when it is divorced from real strategic needs, physical reality, security, you start getting this weird, you mentioned the progressive foreign policy, a weird discourse that exists somewhere else away from the physical needs of people which is security, stability, energy security, economic growth.

So I think if I were to be asked by some of those policy makers what the best course of action is, it's couch all of these discussions in real physical strategic terms where people are clear as to what they bring to the table in any joint venture, right? The Saudis know what is required of them. I mean, the Saudis have helped collapse the Soviet Union by lowering the price of oil at that point in time and funding and equipping the Mujahidin in which fought Russian troops in Afghanistan. They aided in rebuilding Europe after World War II, again, through stabilizing energy markets. They countered the spread of the Soviets in the region in various ways and one way that Bernie mentioned in one his articles was they would fund Italian antifascist anti-Soviet media companies and corporation and newspapers in cooperation with the United States.

All of these things that Saudi did with the United States were real physical things that brought real physical results to the world and delivered peace and delivered stability for millions, if not billions of people. So there's something there that works. What happened, I think, after the Ukraine war is that there was a realization that the strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia is one that is important economically, militarily on many levels but also important in terms of stabilizing energy markets. I think there was a shock that as a result of allowing the relationship to deteriorate as much as it did deteriorate, that close cooperation no longer existed as it existed in the past so I don't know if that answers your question but.

Michael Doran:

I was muted. It doesn't exactly answer the question but it points... It was an unfair question to put to you anyway but I thought maybe I might get a reaction but it does point us in the right
direction. So listen, in closing, let me just... I'll make my summation of what we've concluded here and then you guys can tell me whether you agree or not quickly and then we'll say goodbye to each other.

I would say that the Biden administration is still operating fundamentally within the framework of the realignment toward Iran and the evidence of that is the zeal with which it continues to pursue Iran for the nuclear deal and all the nuclear deal will mean in terms of strengthening Iran, moving it toward a nuclear weapon, and strengthening its forces all around the region and the forces align aligned with it. At the same time, there's something of an awareness growing in the White House that this course is causing trouble with allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel in particular, that it needs and it's making some moves to try to placate those allies but the White House really hasn't even begun to entertain the paradigm shift necessary to really change course and really put those relationships on a sound footing. Bernie, would you agree with that summation?

Bernard Haykel:

Yes, I would and what I don't quite understand is why the plain obvious of reality of the region isn't plainly obvious to them. I mean, I don't understand why they're still like this and my only explanation is domestic politics. That there are domestic commitments within the Democratic Party that are preventing the Biden administration from pursuing what is clearly in America's national security interests.

Michael Doran:

Well, I think you explained it to us. This is basically ruled by professors. We're in this amazing world now where the worldview of the people in Washington, DC running policy is pretty much the same as the worldview of Ivy League professors something I thought I would never see. I ran away from the Ivy League because I thought it was so detached from reality. I never thought to see it chasing me here to Washington, DC but that's what we're saying. Mohammed, any last words for us?

Mohammed Alyahya:

I think I'm out of last words unless you have another question.

Michael Doran:

Now, tell us just to close, just tell us what beautiful part of Saudi Arabia are we looking at behind you?

Mohammed Alyahya:

This is Riyadh.

Michael Doran:

I'll tell you a friend of mine recently went to Riyadh and he came back and he said, "Riyadh is flowering. Jeddah is no longer the place with the exciting nightlife and everything. Riyadh is the place to go." Now, I can see what he's talking about. Have fun in the beaches of Riyadh, Mohammed.
Mohammed Alyahya:
Thank you.

Michael Doran:
All right.