

Biden in Saudi Arabia: Realpolitik vs. Morality

by George Friedman - July 19, 2022

The war in Ukraine rages on as the United States still wants to prevent Russia from effectively reaching Eastern Europe. To that end, Washington's strategy has been to provide weapons to the Ukrainian army and execute an economic war against Russia. Economic warfare is similar to warfare in general. Targeting is imprecise, time frames are uncertain, and the outcomes are unexpected. The most consequential outcome so far has been the removal of oil from global markets, an issue serious enough that internal pressure in some allied nations has forced them to reconsider their position on the war. Oil is simply a politico-military necessity.

This is the context in which U.S. President Joe Biden visited Saudi Arabia, one of the few countries that could single-handedly bring down oil prices through increased supply, at least in theory. Asking for favors from Saudi Arabia was seen as cynical and contributing to human rights violations. The Saudis' violations of those rights are many, but the most high-profile incident was the murder and dismemberment of Saudi dissident and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, who many believe was killed at the behest of Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman. The problem is that Biden is running a war that clearly isn't going to end quickly and is being fought by a fraying coalition. Limiting oil output, stopping Russia and boycotting Saudi Arabia are all seen as moral imperatives, sometimes by the same people. But in this case, the moral imperatives contravene each other, such that Biden can't pursue all three without violating one.

The United States is a moral project. There is corruption, hypocrisy and mutual loathing here because it is a nation, and that is how nations are. But it is also a nation that was invented to stand on moral principles. From the beginning, this proved painful. Shortly after the United States was created, another revolution broke out in France, and like the American Revolution, it was intended to rid the country of the monarchy and create a republic governed by the people.

It appeared that the two regimes were part of the same moral project. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the U.S. Constitution sang the same song. And there was a great deal of pressure, particularly from Thomas Jefferson, to come to the aid of France. He was opposed by George Washington, whose primary concern was American trade with Britain, which was hostile to republican regimes. Trade with Britain was essential to the United States, so Washington put the national interest ahead of a unified moral project.

Supporting France appeared to be a moral action. But the truth was that the United States was a weak and distant nation. Apart from declarations and moral condemnation, there was little the U.S. could do for France. The risk of British retaliation was perhaps small, but risking it for an action that had no practical impact was a dangerous self-indulgence. Jefferson was a serious man, but in growing overly excited by the extension of his moral project, he lost track of his prior responsibility to his own country. Washington, a soldier, was wary of moral gestures but not of morality. He didn't fear sacrifice but despised empty and dangerous gestures.

Similar issues have arisen countless times in American history, and every time they are clouded by these questions: What is moral, and what is the national interest? It is, of course, immoral to kill a Saudi journalist. Would it have been immoral to kill a Nazi diplomat? Is it always immoral to kill someone? Always immoral to kill journalists? Is it immoral only if the journalist was moral?

Realpolitik holds that the interests of the state override all other considerations because without the state, all other matters collapse into chaos. But what exactly is the national interest, does it change with the times, and how should it be produced? Does the United States need oil to maintain the anti-Russian alliance? Does it need Saudi Arabia for help in this regard? Morality always collides with reality.

Roughly 250 years ago, it was not clear that helping France was in fact a moral obligation, especially as the conflict grew more nightmarish. But neither was it clear doing so would have triggered a British response. Britain needed American exports, and its outrage at France might not have trumped that. So when we look at the tension between morality and reality, it turns out that neither is clear. The clarity of strategic planners and the reality of moralists hide ambiguity.

Franklin Roosevelt balanced a hatred of Nazis with the limits of power. He was neither an expert on military power nor the highest authority on what made Nazis evil. What he had was a common sense that saw through the complexity. His common sense taught him what a Nazi was. His common sense advised him about slow but sure aid to Britain. Ronald Reagan was not an intellectual, and his

hostility to Russia was a common value. But his common sense guided him to recognize what few others saw: that the Soviet Union was rotten and due to fall. He did what he could to speed it up.

Realpolitik is a form of arrogance of leaders and academics. So too is moralism. The thing that is the alternative is common sense, which is more properly called wisdom. Wisdom, rare as it is, can determine the importance of oil relative to murder. There is no methodology that can do that.

Wisdom is always rare and frequently criticized for being vague and uninformed. George Washington made his call on France, and it was the right one by the only standard. The country was safe and didn't have to feel as though it compromised its principles. The problem is that wisdom is recognized well after the fact. The wise path is never self-evident or simplistic.

Author: George Friedman

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