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Middle East

Biden's Trip to Middle East Angers Progressives, Socialists

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Pres. Joseph Biden's trip to the Middle East last week, where he met with government leaders in Israel and Saudi Arabia, has disturbed many members of his own Democratic party and angered some progressives. Biden's highest level strategic objective was to solidify U.S. relations with key states in the region, just as he has been doing in Europe, with an eye to America's contest with Russia and challenges from China. More immediately, he hoped to save the Iran nuclear deal, get Saudi Arabia to put more oil on the market, and to once again reinforce the United States' commitment to Israel. His plans, however, may be overshadowed by two murders, both symbolic of large problems in the region.

On October 2, 2018, Saudi government agents assassinated Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist, an act apparently carried out at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who essentially has been running the country. While Khashoggi's brutal and grotesque murder at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul was extraordinary, thousands of others have suffered repression as well. Amnesty International writes that the Kingdom's "Specialized Criminal Court handed down heavy prison terms to individuals for their human rights work and expression of dissenting views."

As a candidate for president in 2020, Biden expressed his belief that Khashoggi was murdered on the order of the crown prince and he pledged to make it very clear that "we were not going to, in fact, sell more weapons to them, we were going to, in fact, make them pay the price and make them, in fact, the pariah that they are." Today, however, with oil scarce and prices rising, and with control of the Middle East of strategic importance in the great game for world domination, all of that is forgotten. Biden never put sanctions on Saudi Arabia and Congress continued to approve billions in military sales.

The other murder that hangs over Biden's visit is that of Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian American reporter for Al Jazeera television who was shot and killed on May 11 of this year by the Israeli Defense Forces. While the IDF initially denied that its soldiers were responsible, investigations by the Associated Press, Bellingcat, CNN, The New York Times, and The Washington Post all independently concluded that she was killed by fire from IDF soldiers, as did the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. CNN suggested that she had been targeted by the IDF, as many Palestinians and others believe.

Like Khashoggi's murder, Abu Akleh's was not only a horrible event, but also highly symbolic, here of the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied territories who have been dispossessed, denied basic rights, subjected to humiliating controls on their movements, and violently repressed. Unlike his vow to treat Saudi Arabia as a pariah, Biden never made important promises of support for the Palestinians and their rights. Biden calls himself a Zionist and says that if Israel didn't exist the United States would have had to create it. But Israel's support among the population has been declining, especially among Democrats, and a growing fraction of American Jews support Palestinian rights. A quarter of U.S. Jews consider Israel to be an "apartheid state."

Some U.S. progressives, the Democratic Socialists of America and other leftists—many Jews among them—support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement led by Palestinians, which aims to apply pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, to grant full and equal right for Palestinian citizens, and to guarantee the Palestinian right of return to their land and homes.

Biden's trip is unlikely to improve the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia or Palestine.

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