

We're Addicted to Oil: Don't ask Human Rights Abusers Saudi Arabia and the UAE for a Fix

Peter Schey
President Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law
March 9, 2022

Human rights never get a pure shake. Our concern for human rights is always intertwined with self-interests and self-serving compromises. This is certainly true in liberal democracies where elected officials routinely must weigh how the cost of too much fealty to this or that group's human rights may doom their political future by creating hardships for their constituencies whose support they need to retain power.

This dilemma now faces President Biden as he casts about for possible sources of oil to replace about 8% of U.S. oil consumption imported from Russia, and tamp down on increasing gas prices. He announced that the U.S. "will not be part of subsidizing Putin's war." But his quandary is now real. Do American voters care enough about Ukraine's sovereign integrity and the safety of its people that they're willing to tolerate price increases at the gas station? Or will their anger at gas price increases result in Democrats being swept out of office in 2022 and 2024?

Not unexpectedly, President Biden, holding his nose, has turned to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hoping they will turn on the spigot of Middle East oil. However, the Wall Street Journal reports that the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have for several weeks declined to schedule calls with President Biden. Yet President Biden reaching out to these Middle East kingdoms to replace oil we refuse to purchase from Russia is filled with irony.

Over the past several years, Saudi and UAE missiles have repeatedly targeted key sections of Yemen's infrastructure and civilian areas. The United Nations reports that after more than six years of conflict, Yemen remains the world's largest humanitarian crisis and millions of displaced Yemenis are only a step away from famine. According to a UN report issued in November, by the end of 2021 about 377,000 people will have died in the war against one of the poorest countries in the world. Until recently, the Saudi-led coalition was included on a UN list of parties responsible for grave violations against children in armed conflict. According to Amnesty International, all parties to the conflict, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have impeded access to humanitarian aid and have detained and tortured hundreds of individuals targeted solely for their political, religious or professional affiliations or their peaceful activism.

In terms of their domestic policies, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have not fared much better than President's Putin's regime in Russia when it comes to respect for democracy and human rights. Saudi Arabia is ruled by a monarch and its laws provide that the rulers of the country shall be male descendants of the founder, King Abdulaziz (Ibn Saud). According to the U.S. State Department's most recent country report, in 2020 the Saudi kingdom tolerated executions for nonviolent offenses, forced disappearances, torture, the detention of political prisoners, serious restrictions on freedom of expression, threats of violence against journalists, censorship, harassment of Saudi dissidents living abroad, substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, severe restrictions of religious freedom, the inability of citizens to choose their government peacefully through free and fair elections, and violence and discrimination against women.

As for the UAE, the rulers of its seven emirates select a president. The emirates are under patriarchal rule with political allegiance defined by loyalty to tribal leaders. According to the US State Department's 2020 country report, human rights issues in the UAE include torture in detention, arbitrary arrests and detention of political prisoners, undue restrictions on free expression and the press, internet site blocking, substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedoms of expression and association, criminalization of same-sex sexual activity, and the inability of citizens to choose their government in free and fair elections.

Perhaps President Biden should rethink whether its a good idea to ask the human rights abusing rulers of Saudi Arabia and the AUE to replace oil the US refuses to buy from the human rights abusing ruler of Russia.

According to the Energy Information Agency, in 2022 to date U.S. weekly imports of Russian crude oil averaged about 57,000 barrels per day, or about 21 million barrels per year. This amounts to about 8% of U.S. oil imports. The Biden administration has already approved the release of 30 million barrels of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. It is committed to release over 90 million barrels from the reserve this fiscal year.

President Biden should remind voters that with about 19% of global production, the U.S. is by far the largest oil producing country in the world. The U.S. is also the biggest consumer of oil. This may be a propitious time to initiate programs aimed at reducing the nation's addiction to fossil fuels.

The administration should lead a campaign to reduce the production and use of plastic products that are made from petrol and encourage the manufacture and use of products made from biodegradable and sustainable materials. The public should be urged to make greater use of public transportation that the country has spent billions of dollars to build. The administration should lead an effort to increase tax benefits for households pursuing clean energy. The administration should now fund research to supplement private industry's work to develop the technology to vastly increase the production of biofuels.

The Obama administration declared in 2013 that increasing America's energy independence and investing in the development of alternate energy resources is not just a critical national security strategy, it is also part of an economic plan that can create jobs, expand growth, and cut the trade deficit.

As the White House director of the National Economic Council Brian Deese recently [said](#), "the only real energy security comes from reducing our economy's dependence on oil and other fossil fuels ... " Rather than reaching out to monarchs and human rights abusers for a life-line so we may perpetuate our addiction to massive fossil fuel consumption, this may be the time to both support human rights in Ukraine while reducing our dependence on oil by using less oil. Using less oil is more compatible with a sincere commitment to human rights than groveling for a quick oil fix before a couple of kingdoms that routinely violate human rights.

* * * * *