

An Inauspicious Start to Biden's Democracies v. Autocracies Campaign

It was odd that Blinken chose to meet with Middle East autocrats in Israel at the same time Biden was marshaling the forces of the 'rules based order.'

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*If **Secretary of State Antony Blinken** wanted to highlight the hypocrisy that so many non-Western nations perceive in President Biden's efforts to depict the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a [global "battle between democracy and autocracy,"](#) he couldn't have chosen better than to attend the Middle East foreign ministers' meeting in Israel today.*

All five of his interlocutors from Israel, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco represent governments that are either monarchical, outright tyrannical, or have invaded and occupy their neighbors' territory by the force of arms.

Blinken's enthusiastic endorsement of this burgeoning axis of Mideast states regardless of their human rights records marks a return to the familiar Cold War politics where generous U.S. support for all kinds of repressive states, especially in the Global South, was justified by the overriding necessity of containing and defeating the Soviet Union.

Blinken of course is trying to get these same governments to back sweeping U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia in order to demonstrate their opposition to Moscow's aggression — even as a growing number of Putin-enabled oligarchs [seek safe haven](#) in Israel and the UAE, in particular.

Blinken also hopes to at least soften or mute their opposition to the still-to-be-concluded revived nuclear deal, no doubt by reassuring them that Washington will sell them ever more sophisticated and expensive U.S.-made weapons systems and participate in more joint military exercises with them.

Thus far, Washington has commended Israel's efforts to mediate between Moscow and Kiev and its dispatch of humanitarian aid, but has otherwise been disappointed by Tel Aviv's failure to provide Ukraine with specific weapons that could materially help Kiev repel the

invasion.

As for the five Arab states at the meeting, despite voting to condemn Russia's aggression in the UN General Assembly, they have tried to [steer a more neutral course](#) on the war. The Biden administration has been particularly frustrated by the UAE's rejection of urgent Western appeals to increase the country's badly needed oil and gas exports to help make up for the shortfall in global markets caused by Western sanctions against Russia. It also didn't help that its de facto leader, **Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan**, extolled his March 1 telephone conversation with Putin while [reportedly refusing to take a call from Biden](#).

Whether Blinken succeeds in persuading his interlocutors to take stronger measures to isolate Russia or reconcile them to Washington's revival of the nuclear deal remains to be seen. But the warm embrace of his Israeli and Arab counterparts in Monday's meeting would seem to undermine — at least in the Middle East — Biden's sweeping message Saturday that Washington is a defender of an international rules-based liberal order that is leading the "perennial struggle for democracy and freedom."

Egypt under **President Abdel al-Sisi** is widely considered, along with Syria, to be perhaps the most repressive dictatorship in the region with thousands of peaceful dissidents languishing for years in overcrowded prisons and most non-governmental organizations operating under unprecedented constraints when they are permitted to operate at all.

"Egyptians under Sisi are living through the worst repression in the country's modern history, according to the latest edition of Human Rights Watch's "[World Report](#)."

Bahrain, whose Sunni royal family rules over a restive Shia majority, according to the same report, pursues a policy of "zero tolerance for dissent," continues to conduct mass trials against dissidents, and has imprisoned key leaders of the Shia community since the 2011 "Arab Spring."

Particularly ironic given the Biden administration's support for Ukraine's defense of its territorial integrity in the face of Russia's invasion and possible occupation, three of the five participating governments in Monday's meeting have invaded and occupied their neighbors' territory in defiance of international law. Morocco invaded and eventually annexed the Western Sahara in the wake of Spain's 1975 withdrawal, prompting a mass exodus of most of the former colony's Sahrawi inhabitants, many of whom remain in refugee camps in Algeria.

Of course, Israel gained control of and occupied the Gaza Strip, Syrian's Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank in the 1967 war and subsequently unilaterally annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights also in defiance of international law. It has also established 130 government-approved settlements housing more than 400,000 of its Jewish citizens on the West Bank in violation of the Geneva Convention, leaving some 2.7 million Palestinians on the West Bank under military occupation, a situation which a growing number of international human rights organizations have denounced as a form of "[apartheid](#)."

As for the UAE, which, along with Saudi Arabia, led the counterrevolution across the Middle East against the "Arab Spring" [imprisoned](#) scores of activists, academics, lawyers, and other dissidents under "dismal and unhygienic conditions" at home, its participation in the Yemen war has resulted in its [effective occupation of Yemen's Mayun Island](#) in the Bab al-Mandab

Strait, and control of Socotra Island. It has also promoted and armed secessionist groups elsewhere in southern Yemen.

If Blinken wants to focus on Russia's aggression and defiance of the international "rules-based order," this meeting is not a good look.

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