

INSS Insight No. 1121, December 24, 2018

**The Future of Relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia,
and the Implications for Israel**

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Recent decisions by the United States Senate concerning the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the future of American involvement in the war in Yemen reflect the large gap between the Trump administration and many lawmakers regarding relations with Saudi Arabia. It appears that despite President Trump's desire to put the Khashoggi affair behind him, the last word has not yet been said. The pressures on the administration are not intended to bring the historical relations with Saudi Arabia to an end, but rather to send a clear message to the kingdom and in particular to Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman that there are consequences for "irresponsible" Saudi behavior, and that Riyadh must also consider US needs and interests. The level of intimacy that has characterized US-Saudi relations since the start of the Trump administration and the depth of the bilateral cooperation will likely be affected by the steps the administration will take, and even more, by Saudi Arabia's response to these steps. The priorities demonstrated by Israel's Prime Minister regarding the implications of the Khashoggi affair are correct, and Israel must continue to walk the fine line between denouncing actions that clearly violate human rights and signaling that the kingdom has an important role in creating the regional balance of power and advancing the interests it shares with Israel.

The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen that is heightened by the ongoing military campaign have led to a confrontation between the Trump administration and Congress, including Republican lawmakers who are considered allies of the President. In a departure from President Trump's position, the US Senate unanimously passed a declaratory resolution placing full responsibility on Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) for the murder. In addition, the Senate passed a bill stating that the United States must cease the army's support for Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Already in November, the US Air Force stopped air refueling for Arab coalition planes attacking Houthi targets in Yemen, although it has also been claimed that in any event the kingdom has independent air refueling capability.

The decided gap on these issues between the administration and the lawmakers grew even larger after the CIA completed its briefing to the relevant committees of both houses of Congress. Trump himself, who promised to veto legislation on Yemen passed by both houses, continues to back MBS and to emphasize that the US interest is to maintain the special relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. In his view, the reasons this relationship is important to the administration have not changed, and despite the moral problem of the journalist's murder, US strategic needs, chief among them economic benefits and the partnership in the struggle against Iran, require that the United States not turn its back on the kingdom.

However, the impression is that despite the President's desire to put the affair behind him, the last word has not yet been said. The administration has been accused of a conciliatory policy toward MBS that has strengthened his assessment that the administration will accept all of his actions and refrain from holding him to account. It is thus important to US officials that the administration not be taken for granted. Trump himself, critical of the murder, has demanded that the Saudis take action to reduce oil prices and assist the United States economically and militarily in advancing its policy in the Middle East. In any case, it seems that the pressures placed on the administration are not intended to bring the historical relations with Saudi Arabia to an end, but rather to send a clear message to the kingdom and in particular to the Crown Prince, that there are consequences for "irresponsible" Saudi behavior and that it must also take into consideration US needs and interests.

The United States and Saudi Arabia will likely continue to see relations between them as a strategic objective, and if relations between Washington and Riyadh survived the Saudi involvement in the September 11 attacks, the two countries will presumably be able to overcome the current crisis as well. In addition, in previous administrations and even more so at present, the issue of human rights has not at the end of the day been a decisive factor in determining political policy. However, the level of intimacy that has characterized these relations since early in the Trump administration and the depth of the bilateral cooperation are expected to be affected by both the steps that the administration will take, and even more, by Saudi Arabia's response to these steps. Aside from punitive measures already taken toward a number of Saudis, it is doubtful that the administration will put the blame entirely on the Crown Prince, but it has a number of options, some of which the lawmakers are eyeing, with respect to the level of cooperation with the Saudi-led coalition is waging in Yemen, and with respect to the amount and quality of weapons that the United States sells to Saudi Arabia.

So far, the Saudi leadership has attempted to refrain from criticizing the reactions in the United States, and MBS has tried to project a sense of business as usual, including in his

round of visits to Arab states and his participation in the G20 in Argentina. The Saudi Foreign Ministry condemned the Senate's recent decisions, "which are based on unfounded accusations," and rejected any interference in the kingdom's internal affairs. In the Saudi response, the hope was expressed (or the threat was implied) that the discussion would remain an internal American one and there would be no negative effects on the strategic bilateral relations. However, it is likely clear to MBS that the danger is not yet over and the administration may need to take stronger measures, which will confront him with the dilemma of how to respond. It seems that the possible response scenarios on the part of the kingdom range from ignoring the storm and waiting for the anger to pass, or, alternatively, adopting aggressive measures to demonstrate to the Americans the price that they may pay if they maintain their positions (perhaps strengthening relations with Russia?). At the same time, the Saudis, spurred by the Crown Prince, can also pursue an active policy to improve the kingdom's tarnished image, demonstrate its strategic value, and hint at potential regional consequences of harming their standing. This trend is perhaps already expressed in a greater willingness to support finding a diplomatic UN-sponsored solution to the campaign in Yemen, and in the desire to advance military deals with the United States, including the acquisition of air defense systems, and moves toward a deal on nuclear cooperation. In this context, Saudi Arabia could also take steps that would signify an intention to increase its efforts in the campaign against Iran and perhaps, though less likely - in part due to the weakening of Bin Salman's internal standing and within the Arab/Muslim world - steps that would signal willingness to make progress on normalization with Israel.

Since the beginning of the crisis surrounding the Khashoggi affair, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has emphasized the seriousness of the journalist's murder while refraining from directly attacking the Crown Prince, and notes the value Israel sees in the stability of the kingdom as part of the struggle against Iran. Indeed, it seems that the international community in general and the United States in particular attaches great importance to the internal stability of Saudi Arabia as a central element in defending the many interests in the region. However, it is also widely believed that the steps taken by the kingdom under MBS leadership – both internally and especially the power struggles that he has waged against a long list of Saudis, chief among them Khashoggi, and regionally, the ongoing campaign in Yemen, the struggle against Qatar, and the "abduction" of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his forced resignation – have contributed to undermining regional stability. It is understood that through their policy, the Saudis are in effect playing into Iranian hands. Tehran in turn may perceive this as a weakened kingdom, and this provides Iran with greater latitude.

The Prime Minister's priorities in regard to the handling of the Khashoggi affair are correct, and Israel must continue to walk the fine line between denouncing actions that

clearly violate human rights and understanding that the chances of meaningfully influencing the behavior of the Saudi regime from the outside are low. Even more important, the kingdom has an important role to play in creating a regional balance of power that furthers Israel's interests. Israel, which has a basic interest in maintaining the stability of the kingdom, understands that increasing the external pressure on the kingdom at this time could undermine this stability. At the same time, Israel must avoid overly identifying with MBS in order not to harm its moral image.

Even if there is no expectation that in the near future Saudi Arabia will reward Israel, in the long run Israel's position on the Khashoggi affair might be taken into account in future decisions by the Saudi leadership. However, an unrestrained Saudi policy may also have negative consequences for Israel, and thus there is an even greater imperative to find a way to make clear to the Crown Prince that there are limits to the use of force and that he must take into account the interests of other parties.