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US-Saudi Relations: What Lies Ahead?

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With Joe Biden's entry into the White House, Saudi Arabia's acting ruler Mohammed bin Salman will be required to adjust Saudi policy in order to maintain positive relations with the new administration. Against the backdrop of criticism in the United States of certain steps Saudi Arabia has taken – most notably the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen – the future relations between the two countries is a matter of concern, including for Israel. Saudi Arabia will have to prove that it remains an essential United States ally. Strengthening relations with Washington is a top interest for the Saudis and can also impact on bin Salman's domestic standing. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's economic, religious, and political weight is an important asset to any US administration seeking to block Iranian advances and reduce Chinese and Russian involvement in the region. Both Washington and Riyadh attach importance to Israel's position in the context of US-Saudi relations. It is possible that the new US administration, which is expected to support continued normalization measures in the region, will seek to leverage Riyadh's willingness to take steps toward Israel to advance dialogue with the Palestinians. It is therefore important for Israel to share its expectations on this issue with the Biden administration, and engage in dialogue about it with the Saudis (which apparently occurred in the Netanyahu-bin Salman meeting of November 22) and the United Arab Emirates.

Under President Trump, relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States flourished, driven by the belief that this would serve the interests of both countries. President Trump made his first visit as President outside the United States to Riyadh, and some senior officials in the outgoing US administration had very close associations with Saudi counterparts. In addition, senior administration figures were taken with Saudi Crown Prince and acting ruler Mohammed bin Salman. In tandem, the centrality formerly assigned to values such as human rights and political freedom that partially determined the depth of the relations was abandoned by the administration. President Trump, who sought to distinguish himself from his predecessor Barack Obama, saw the Saudi kingdom as a possible axis for American policy in the Middle East, and went to great lengths to shield bin Salman from international and American criticism, especially from Congress. Highlighting the economic contribution of relations with the Saudi kingdom to the US

economy, the President even vetoed bipartisan legislation to halt arms sales and other military assistance to Saudi Arabia due to its involvement in the war in Yemen.

Now, in anticipation of Joe Biden's entry into the White House, Mohammed bin Salman will have to adjust the kingdom's policies to maintain strong relations with the new administration. Against the backdrop of criticism in Congress (especially among Democrats) and in American public opinion of certain steps Saudi Arabia has taken – most notably the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen – the future relations between the countries is a matter of concern.

Under the Obama administration, sharp tensions existed between Saudi Arabia and the US, and presumably Riyadh fears that Washington will now adopt stricter policies to protest the incarceration of women and human rights activists. During his election campaign, the President-elect said that Washington needs to "[reassess](#)" its relations with Riyadh. Riyadh has also [voiced](#) its concern that the Biden administration will be more open to political Islam movements in the region. Biden's condemnation of the Saudi leadership was harsh, but it is too early to say how much the campaign rhetoric will translate into actual American policy. President Trump was also highly critical of the Saudis in his first election campaign, but interests changed over the course of his tenure and the United States granted the Saudis considerable leeway domestically and regionally.

Furthermore, among US allies in the Middle East there is growing concern that due to both America's domestic challenges and a continuing trend to reduce military involvement in the region, the Middle East will not rank high on the administration's agenda, at least not initially. The United States under Democratic rule, the Saudis fear, could change its policy toward Iran, with reduced pressure from sanctions and a possible return to the nuclear deal, without taking Saudi interests into account: first and foremost, Iran's threatening missile arsenal and its support for subversive elements such as the Houthis in Yemen. Therefore, Saudi Arabia seeks to be involved in all potential negotiations with Iran to avoid unexpected, undesirable outcomes.

Disagreements notwithstanding, relations between Riyadh and Washington are based on common interests and have overcome acute crises in the past. Moreover, the complex reality in the Middle East does not usually leave much time for testing the waters. However, it is clear to both sides that in contrast to the intimacy that prevailed between the countries under President Trump, the new administration is expected to manage the relations in a more businesslike atmosphere. The ball now appears to be in the Saudi court, and Riyadh must prove that the kingdom remains a vital ally to the United States. Strengthened relations with the United States is a top interest for the Saudis and also impacts on bin Salman's internal standing. However, in this process Riyadh will not be alone, and will

compete for the administration's favor with its Qatari and Emirati neighbors. They will all be asked to acknowledge the new administration with tangible measures, such as even a cosmetic increase in individual liberties and political freedom; continued and perhaps greater advanced security procurement from the United States; and greater involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

In this context, it seems that Saudi Arabia has already begun to lay the groundwork for possible normalization with Israel, and is considering the price it might exact and the best timing. In the background are the media reports of a meeting on November 22, 2020 in Saudi Arabia between the Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Unlike the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the Saudi kingdom has greater sensitivities and constraints at home and abroad that challenge moves to draw closer to Israel. The kingdom will likely be interested in giving the incoming US president the "gift" of normalization with Israel in order to iron out existing tensions with him. However, if Saudi Arabia ultimately takes steps in this regard before the new administration takes office, it is likely that it will seek to leverage this willingness to influence the incoming President's approach to the kingdom. It seems that the Biden administration will support the normalization processes between Israel and the Arab states, even if it might be less generous with the American "payment" for these arrangements. Another "gift" that Riyadh (and with it Abu Dhabi) might give Biden is an improvement in relations with Qatar and an end to the crisis between the Gulf states, which goes against staunch American interests in the region.

Unlike Obama in his early days as President, Biden is a veteran politician who knows the Middle East and the ways in which United States allies operate in the region. Therefore he is likely to take a practical and less ideological approach than Obama, even though the demand for human rights protection will be more pronounced than in the Trump era. Saudi Arabia, for its part, could earn points from the new administration if, for example, it released prominent human rights activists from prison, such as activist Loujain al-Hathloul and blogger Raif Badawi. The US administration is also expected to demand that the Saudis take concrete steps in the short term toward a potential political solution to the war in Yemen. Indeed, Biden's chances of ending the war in Yemen may be stronger, if only because of his critical attitude toward the kingdom – considerable leverage in and of itself – along with Riyadh's apparent desire to put behind it a chapter that has demanded considerable economic and political costs. However, Riyadh does not want the solution to result in a pro-Iranian element remaining on the ground, threatening its security. The main obstacle at this stage is that the kingdom has no clear exit strategy from the war. For their part, the Houthis, who now have the upper hand, have no interest in altering the status quo, which affords them military power and ability to influence the future of Yemen.

The bottom line is that Saudi Arabia, despite the devaluation of its status and influence in recent years, is a major regional and global actor that is hard to ignore. Its economic, religious, and political weight is an important asset to any US administration seeking to block Iranian advances and reduce Chinese and Russian involvement in the region. Saudi Arabia also needs a partnership with the United States, which is still the only global power that can offer the kingdom a set of strategic and political capabilities that far exceed what its competitors can provide. This convergence of interests is expected to allow both countries to overcome disagreements and continue the close association that has characterized their relations in recent years. In addition, both Washington and Riyadh attach importance to Israel's position in the context of US-Saudi relations. It is possible that the new US administration will seek to use Saudi Arabia's willingness to take steps towards Israel as leverage to advance dialogue and arrangements with the Palestinians. It is therefore important for Israel to set expectations on this issue with the Biden administration, and engage in dialogue with the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates.