

United States and Saudi Arabia: Recalculating their Route

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President Biden has kept his election promise and published a report by the United States intelligence community stating that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, by virtue of his position and status, bears responsibility for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The publication of this report is part of the process of the new administration's "recalibration" of relations between the two countries. While the Trump administration relied on an intimate relationship with Saudi Arabia, the Biden administration intends to adopt a business-like approach that will further US interests, but will not ignore values such as human rights. Saudi Arabia rejected the report and condemned its conclusions, but it is not ignoring the new winds blowing in Washington, and is adjusting its policy, primarily in internal matters. Despite the current uncertainty, since these bilateral relations are based on common interests, it will presumably be possible for the countries to overcome their disputes. For its part, Israel should emphasize to the US administration the possible regional consequences of pressure on Saudi Arabia, and the risk that the trend toward normalization with Israel will slow down or come to a halt. At the same time, it is recommended that Israel act cautiously and discreetly, because clearly siding with Riyadh, especially bin Salman (currently persona non grata in Washington), is liable to cast a shadow on the dialogue between Jerusalem and Washington.

United States President Joe Biden has kept his election promise and published an [unclassified report by the American intelligence community](#), which states that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), by virtue of his position and status, is responsible for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey in October 2018. The publication of this report is part of the process of the new administration's "recalibration" of United States relations with Saudi Arabia. Publication of the report was preceded by a [telephone call](#) to Saudi King Salman, in which President Biden emphasized, inter alia, that he intended to ensure that relations between the two countries would be "strong and transparent."

Messages by senior administration spokesmen since the report was published highlight the American intention to focus on human rights – and inter alia this will affect relations

between Washington and Riyadh. This was the background to [the United States' imposition of sanctions against those involved in the murder](#), and the US has reserved the right to take additional measures. Indeed, Democratic legislators are exerting great pressure on the President and calling on him to step up the measures against Saudi Arabia, including a demand for sanctions against the Crown Prince and a total halt in arms transactions with the kingdom. On the other hand, messages from Washington stress that Saudi Arabia is a strategic partner, and that close ties with it are important for furthering American interests. Concomitant with sanctions and reports of reconsideration of arms deals reached with the preceding administration, the administration has reiterated that does not want to rupture relations with Saudi Arabia, and that it will continue to provide it with the protection that it requires against external threats.

Another factor in US relations with Saudi Arabia is the administration's decision to terminate United States offensive support for the coalition led by the kingdom in the war in Yemen, and to remove the Houthis from the list of terrorist organizations, with the aim of ending the fighting and focusing on humanitarian aid to Yemen.

For its part, Riyadh rejected the report and condemned its conclusions, but it is not ignoring the new winds blowing in Washington, and is adjusting its policy. Even before the report was published, Riyadh began introducing changes in its internal policy in anticipation of the emphases expected from the new administration. Among these measures are the announcement of law reform and the release of a number of prisoners, headed by a leading women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul (a move that won praise from the US administration).

Despite the current uncertainty about relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, it appears that the Biden administration's announcement that it was "recalibrating" its relations with the kingdom was not designed to have a negative impact on relations, but instead reflected a desire to configure the ties with the Saudi leadership along lines more comfortable for the United States while enabling it to continue the strategic partnership. From the administration's perspective, a business-like approach of the two sides that takes into account mutual interests will make it possible to maintain the bilateral relationship. It is clear to the administration that its relations with Saudi Arabia also have a direct effect on the ability of the US to achieve its goals in the Middle East, including the ability to cope with Iran's belligerent policy in the region, promote the Abraham Accords, and end the war in Yemen.

Given that the relations between Riyadh and Washington are based on common interests, they will presumably be able to overcome the disputes, as they have in the past. Furthermore, President Biden is familiar with the Middle East, and is expected to adopt a

practical approach, albeit combined with an emphasis on human rights. The administration will strive to reach a delicate balance between its values and its understanding of the kingdom's needs. The administration has decided to impose direct sanctions only on the others involved in the Khashoggi murder, not on the Crown Prince, with the excuse that the United States does not impose sanctions on leaders of countries with which it has diplomatic ties (the administration has had to defend itself repeatedly against this criticism). This policy reflects a realization that MBS is here to stay, and probably for the long term. It is also likely that even if he is currently *persona non grata* in Washington, the administration will subsequently find ways to conduct a dialogue with him, given his important and influential role in the Saudi leadership.

The US effort to walk this tightrope also reflects an assessment that it would be a mistake to box Saudi Arabia into a corner, because excessively severe measures against Riyadh would be liable to damage more than benefit American interests. Like Israel, Saudi Arabia's security concept rests, *inter alia*, on the realization by its enemies that the United States provides the kingdom with support and backing. Preserving and strengthening relations with the United States is a supreme interest for Saudi Arabia as well, and is also significant for bin Salman's status at home. In an extreme scenario, a negative development in relations with the United States is liable to undermine internal stability in the kingdom (for example, unduly pressuring the Crown Prince, isolating him, and boycotting him could encourage his opponents to deprive him of his status as a leader, and even to eliminate him). It is likely that the US is aware that weakening Saudi Arabia and downgrading the bilateral relations will redouble Iran's motivation for attacking the kingdom. Furthermore, such a situation is likely to bring Riyadh closer to Beijing and Moscow.

Moreover, the measures taken by the administration toward Saudi Arabia to date are liable to be viewed negatively by the other Gulf states. It cannot be ruled out that in their view, what is now happening is a "rerun" of the actions by the Obama administration in the Middle East, which gave the impression that the United States could not be trusted to stand by the side of its allies in the region in a crisis. This possibility is likely to motivate them to tighten their defense relations with Israel, but could also lead them to take measured steps toward a rapprochement with Iran. In such a case, they can be expected to become less assertive in the region, concentrate on internal affairs, and open a dialogue with Iran.

The development of relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia is also expected to affect Israel, especially the continuation of the trend toward regional normalization – expansion of Israel's existing agreements with the Gulf states and the accession of other countries to the process, above all Saudi Arabia itself. It is highly important to preserve the regional political and security front against Iran, in which Saudi

Arabia has a critical role. It therefore follows that Israel has a clear interest that any damage to relations between Washington and Riyadh be kept to a minimum and be potentially reversible. For this reason, Israel should explain to the US administration the possible consequences of pressure on Saudi Arabia. Its advocacy on behalf of Saudi Arabia, however, should be cautious and discreet, because clearly siding with Riyadh, especially MBS, who is currently the object of severe criticism in the Democratic Party, is liable to cast a shadow on the dialogue between Jerusalem and Washington.

The bottom line is that Saudi Arabia, despite the great displeasure in Washington at its conduct in the context of human rights and the prolonged and bloody war in Yemen, is an important regional player that can hardly be ignored without causing damage to US interests in the region. The kingdom's economic, religious, and political weight is an important asset for any US administration seeking to thwart Iran and limit Chinese and Russian intervention in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia also needs the partnership with the United States, which is currently the only global power able to offer it an assortment of strategic and political capabilities far beyond those of its rivals. In time, this meeting of interests is likely to enable Washington and Riyadh to overcome the disputes between them, and to continue the close ties typical of their relations in recent years – even if the current administration's policy differs from what the kingdom encountered under the preceding administration.