

US Relations with Arab Gulf States: A Passing Crisis?

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Ahead of a possible visit to the Middle East by US President Joe Biden and his meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Washington and Riyadh have accelerated the talks between them in an attempt to improve their relations, which have been cold ever since Biden took office. The tension between the countries has escalated against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the feeling of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that the Biden administration, in contrast to its predecessor, does not regard them as important allies, and that it sometimes acts against their interests. Improved relations between the US and Saudi Arabia will also affect Israel, especially its interest in continued regional normalization by expanding the agreements with the Gulf states and adding other countries to the process – especially Saudi Arabia.

It was recently reported that US President Joe Biden was considering a visit to Saudi Arabia, including a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as part of a possible visit to the Middle East. At the same time, the countries have accelerated the dialogue between them during the visit of the Saudi deputy defense minister to Washington about ways of improving their relations. If such a meeting of President Biden does take place, it will represent a significant change in relations, which have been cold since Biden took office. The decline in relations has mostly been the result of the Biden administration's policy; immediately upon taking office, the administration announced a "recalibration" of US relations with Saudi Arabia, which had prospered during the term of former President Donald Trump and led to close relations between the leaders of the two countries. President Biden even fulfilled his campaign promise to publish a report by the US intelligence community accusing bin Salman, due to his control of decision making in the kingdom, of being responsible for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Relations further declined after Saudi Arabia flatly refused American requests to increase oil production in order to help lower the price of oil after the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are especially concerned about the diminishing American attentiveness to their security problems. They are particularly angry that Washington expects them to respond to US demands with alacrity, most recently in the context of oil production, while the US turns its back on their requests in the security sphere. The US administration's policy in the Middle East and its lack of focus on what Riyadh and Abu Dhabi consider critical issues have made them realize that the current US administration, in contrast to its predecessors, does not regard them as important allies and sometimes even acts against their interests.

Thus, the Gulf states perceived the hasty American departure from Afghanistan as realizing the US trend of withdrawing from the Middle East. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia expected greater American assistance in countering the Houthis attacks against its strategic home front and were surprised at the US decision to withdraw forces from Saudi territory, especially anti-missile and anti-drone defenses. The United Arab Emirates also expected a determined American response – military and diplomatic – following the attack by the Houthis in January 2022. The UAE was mainly surprised by the [refusal](#) of the American administration to add the Houthis to the list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTO), after the US administration had [removed](#) them from the list immediately after Biden took office. The Gulf states were also disappointed with US policy toward Iran, its main threat, including the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear question. President Biden's refusal at the beginning of his term to talk to bin Salman was perceived as interfering in Saudi internal affairs and was seen as a blow to the legitimacy of its acting ruler and future king. Furthermore, the tension between Washington and Abu Dhabi has increased in the past year, following Abu Dhabi's upgrading of its relations with China and warming of relations with Syria, as reflected by the visit of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad to the UAE. Due to American concerns about leaking technology to China, Abu Dhabi suspended negotiations for the purchase of the F-35 from the US. Improved relations between the US and Qatar also aggravated the tensions in Washington's relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

The tension in relations between Washington on the one hand and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the other [escalated](#) even further following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. From the beginning of the war, the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have refrained from criticizing Russia and have sought to disassociate themselves as much as possible from the crisis between Russia and the West. They dragged their feet and did not cooperate with American efforts to isolate Russia politically and economically; for example, they refused to increase their oil production in order to lower the price of oil. This refusal by Riyadh led many Democratic legislators to [step up](#) their pressure on the administration to increase its measures against Saudi Arabia. *The Wall Street Journal* also reported that when US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan brought up the subject of Khashoggi, bin Salman [shouted](#) at him that Washington could forget about its request for an increase in Saudi oil production.

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine again has highlighted the strategic importance of the Gulf to the global energy sector and the growing value of the Arab Gulf states for the major powers. While Saudi Arabia was turning a cold shoulder to the US, it invited China's President Xi Jinping to visit the kingdom, and Riyadh is negotiating with China (the leading customer of Saudi oil) over the pricing in the oil deals between them in Chinese currency, instead of in American dollars, as was the practice until now.

Up until now, despite efforts that included a visit to Saudi Arabia by CIA Director William Burns, it has been [reported](#) that no visible progress has been made between Saudi Arabia and the US because of President Biden's refusal to meet Saudi Arabia half way. The Arab countries have linked their concerns to the emerging nuclear agreement with Iran, which they believe will benefit Iran, as it does not address the issues of Iranian terrorism and subversion in the region and the proliferation of missiles and drones for which Iran is responsible. The Gulf countries are therefore seeking what they see as an appropriate quid pro quo for falling in line with the American position – increased intelligence cooperation with them and the

strengthening of their defensive capabilities. Saudi Arabia also expects American assistance in developing a nuclear program and restoring good relations between Washington and bin Salman, including his immunity from a possible lawsuit in the US concerning his involvement in the Khashoggi murder.

The reports of Biden's possible visit to Saudi Arabia likely reflect Washington's assessment that its poor relations with Riyadh are harming American interests, with an emphasis on the need to ensure that the kingdom and the other Gulf states will continue to view the US as an ally and will refrain from advancing processes that will increase their reliance on China and Russia. The need to convince Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production is especially palpable at the current time. The American administration has already taken steps to heal the breach, including appointing an ambassador to Riyadh (after 15 months), holding telephone calls, and undertaking visits to the kingdom by senior officials. It is unclear, however, whether President Biden has already decided to end the "boycott," because in addition to the political price that he is liable to pay, meeting with bin Salman will be a tacit admission that political constraints require moral compromises, with an emphasis on the administration's human rights demands.

It is still premature to assess whether a substantial positive change in relations between Washington and Riyadh is in store, despite their common interests. In any case, a summit between Biden and bin Salman will require careful preparation to guarantee its success, even if the two parties do not bridge all the disputed issues.

A successful visit by Biden to Riyadh and improvement in relations between the US and Saudi Arabia will have significance for Israel, especially in terms of Israel's interest to continue the trend toward regional normalization – expanding the agreements with the Gulf states and adding more countries to the process, above all Saudi Arabia itself. Israel has a clear interest in

both Saudi stability and improving its relations with the US, so that it continues to constitute part of the pro-American Arab camp. It is also important to maintain the regional political and security front against Iran, of which Saudi Arabia is a significant part.