

# "BIDEN IN RIYADH: HOPE FOR THE CHALLENGED U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP?"



## SUMMARY OF A 'GULF INTERNATIONAL FORUM' WEBINAR



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In a 'GIF' webinar moderated by Professor Daniel Serwer (*Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*), a panel of speakers with in-depth knowledge of the region provided their assessment of Joe Biden's first trip as President to the Middle East and its impact on US-Saudi relations.

Issues given particular attention to and covered included the following:

- Why did Biden visit Jeddah after calling it a "pariah" state?
- Are U.S.-Saudi relations institutionalized, or based on personal relations between the two countries' leaders?
- How have the foundations of the geopolitical relationship changed over the last decade?
- Is Saudi Arabia looking for a new superpower partner?
- Finally, how have economic issues, including the global transition to cleaner energy, changed the calculus of US-GCC relations?

It is no secret that major challenges in the past have affected US-Saudi relations; policymakers in both countries traded harsh rhetorical blows over the 1973 oil embargo, the degree of Saudi Arabia's culpability for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and most recently the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi operatives in Istanbul.

In spite of these tensions, the partnership between the two states has endured. In 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and as the U.S. is engaged in talks with Iran to revive the JCPOA nuclear agreement, the two countries appear to have realized the need for closer coordination given the fact that over the past decade, the two countries have held opposite views on the Arab Spring, the war in Yemen, the implementation of the JCPOA, the

degree of Washington's commitment to the security of the Gulf region, Saudi-Russian coordination in the oil market, and other topics related to the intra-GCC relations and domestic changes in Saudi Arabia.

All of these topics have had an impact on the Saudi-American partnership. As the divergence became more obvious, Riyadh has pursued closer ties with Moscow and Beijing, and Washington has sought to form a more effective partnership with other Arab countries to balance its interests in the region.

#### KEY POINTS ADDRESSED BY THE SPEAKERS

1. **DR. KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN** (*Baker Institute Fellow for the Middle East, Rice University; Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Gulf International Forum*)
  - Perceptions of success regarding Biden's trip depends on the questions asked. Impact of various ongoing issues (war and energy crisis etc.) all contributed to Biden to want to take some kind of an initiative.
  - But asking MBS for the Saudis to produce more oil, did hurt Biden within his own constituency inside the US especially with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.
  - While focused on the main theme of promoting 'normalization, the challenges for both the White House and regional states were mostly around the deepening security issues such as the prospect of an 'Arab NATO' which, itself, was essentially a non-starter.
  - As such, there were no major breakthroughs as a consequence of these meetings that could justify the holding of such meetings at this particular time. As a result, the accounts provided by the White House and the Saudis have differed sharply especially on issues pertaining to oil policy.
  - It is a fact that contrary to US views on a variety of issues, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) wants to maintain the OPEC + , the UAE wants to reopen its embassy in Tehran and the Iraqis are calling for some kind of a regional security arrangement that includes Iran.
  - In short there was more divergence than convergence that came out of Biden's meetings in KSA.
  - As for the future, it is a fact that Biden has by default given MBS the recognition he wanted.
  - With no sign of the energy crisis coming to an end (especially for the Europeans), the Gulf states are unlikely to be side-lined or come up

with any kind of a US pleasing narrative on such issues as climate change and greener energy etc. anytime soon.

- The fact that Biden refused to meet with the family of Shireen Al Aqla while visiting the Palestinian areas did a great deal of damage. Indeed, this was an issue which MBS also raised with Biden in the course of their discussions.
- On OPEC+, the Saudi Oil Minister, Abdul Aziz bin Salman was recently in St. Petersburg where he offered full cooperation to the Russians.
- Given that both KSA and Russia value this cooperation, Biden's visit to the Kingdom did not manage to change anything on that front.
- Ultimately, MBS will be judged by what he produces for Vision 2030 – i.e., the investment and the technology his country will need to move forward. This is something that a country like Israel can also play a very crucial role and contribute in a meaningful manner.
- Hence, this aspect of the visit – i.e., the technological cooperation side came out much better than its more mundane geo-political aspects.

## 2. **DR. ABDULLAH ALSHAYJI** (*Professor, Kuwait University*)

- From the start, were it not for the rising energy prices in the US and the upcoming mid-term elections, it was apparent that Biden was not very eager to want to come to the Middle East at this time - this is something that was corroborated by various leaks in the US and especially Israeli press (e.g., Israeli TV Channel 12).
- Nonetheless, the trip did get away from a kind of divisive narrative that had existed and restored a sense of 'Real Politick'.
- He reminded people of the comment that had been made by Condoleezza Rice who had said that for the past 50 years, the US has struggled in the Middle East in a battle for the promotion of freedom and human rights over security and stability, an endeavour in which it has failed on all fronts.
- Part of coming back to 'Real Politick', has been to get away from the kind of rhetoric that the region was being downgraded in view of other more pressing issues such as rising US concerns for China and Russia.
- While Biden had been explicit that 'America was back', he was at the same uncertain for how long the US was likely to remain in the Middle

East. Indeed, in his press conferences, he had been more willing to talk about 'fist pumps' and Khashoggi than anything substantial.

- However, Biden's most provocative statement had come when in Israel when he had said that "you don't have to be a Jew to be Zionist"!
- In Saudi Arabia, mindful that the Saudis might be anticipating the Republicans to make a comeback in both 2022 and 2024, Biden's main areas of concerns during his talks with MBS and GCC + 3 states leaders were focused on the following areas:
  - Russia and the war in Ukraine
  - Oil, energy and food security
  - An attempt to drive a wedge between KSA and Russia in OPEC +
  - Consolidating pressures on Iran
- However, at the end of the day, Biden's visit to the region was nothing more than a lost opportunity with no confidence building measures apart from rhetoric and PR.
- Security in the region has always trumped human rights (no matter how important human rights may be for some states). Nonetheless, given its own record, the US is in no position to lecture the GCC states on human rights issues.
- On Russia, OPEC + is something that all parties need to grapple with though at the same time it is something that is here to stay, especially as the US is well aware that KSA has a limited spare capacity, which does not place it in a position whereby it can help Biden in any kind of a meaningful manner.
- Moreover, the GCC states also have no desire to antagonize Russia having taken a measured amount of sanctions against them. They prefer instead to remain neutral.
- Biden has downgraded the fear of the GCC states (especially GCC fear of Iran), but not meeting with the family of Shireen Al Aqla was a missed opportunity.
- Biden had earlier committed a huge blunder by removing the Houthis from the list of terrorist organizations, and in the final analysis his trip is likely to increase regional suspicions of the US more than anything else.

### 3. **ANNA JACOBS** (*Gulf States Senior Analyst, Crisis Group*)

- With a different take to that of the previous speaker, she was of the view that there had been some positive gains in the fields of diplomacy and economic cooperation resulting from Biden's trip as part of an attempt to reset US-Middle East relations more broadly.
- However, while the GCC + 3 countries wanted to hear about a new US strategy , it was clear at the end that nothing major was forthcoming though US-Saudi ties did get a boost.
- Although Biden's side meetings with the GCC + 3 leaders were generally positive, perhaps the most important achievement was the announcement that Iraq would be linked up with the main GCC electric grid.
- US plans to offer a counter proposal to the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' also got a hearing without any concrete announcements.
- In the discussions, it was made clear to Biden that the smaller GCC states - e.g., Qatar, Oman and Kuwait did not favour a hostile relationship with Iran but instead preferred to leave paths open for diplomatic engagement and some economic cooperation. It was clear that all of these states did not wish to enter into a confrontational mode with Iran.
- This is perhaps why the Saudis also shied away from any kind of an anti-Iran defence pact with Israel.
- While some of the GCC have wanted to normalise their ties with Israel, but at the same time they have not wanted to antagonize Iran.
- The 5 rounds of Iran-KSA talks in Baghdad under the aegis of Iraq have helped with the intel track in Yemen and have contributed to the fact that the cease-fire in that country has now held for the past 3 months.

4. **PROFESSOR DOUGLAS LONDON** (*Professor, ex-CIA and Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service; Non-Resident Fellow, the Middle East Institute*)

- Subjectivity played a key role into how one read the outcome of this visit.
- In terms of US-Saudi relations, it was important to point out that this relationship has always been accompanied with a great deal of tension over a number of issues (e.g., 1973 oil embargo, Saudi role in 911, Saudi funding of Al Qaeda, war in Yemen etc.). Moreover, it has never been a

relationship based on friendship or alliance. On the contrary, it has been a perfect relationship that bends but never breaks.

- There is no question that to a great extent, Biden did manage to rehabilitate MBS. Indeed, MBS needed validation and in this regard, Biden did provide the help he needed.
- However, it is important to point out that MBS has himself gone through a learning curve after embarking on a number of fiasco adventures that have failed miserably - e.g., attempt to crush Qatar, his attempt to secure a quick victory in Yemen and to lead hostilities against Iran). It is a fact that the war in Yemen and Yemeni attacks on Saudi soil have seriously weakened him at home.
- Despite all recent problems, the US has so far not refrained from selling new arms to KSA. In fact, it has been the Saudis who have reduced their arms purchases by 10% in the past few years due to the priority that MBS has given to economic development and Vision 2030.
- On the question of reduced US Commitments to the Middle East, it is also a fact that the US has never left (or for that matter intending to leave) the Middle East given the reality that it is very much tied in many ways to this region.
- The US is also fairly confident that there are limits to Saudi closeness with parties like China or Russia - especially given their increased level of cooperation with Iran.
- For KSA, Iran has been and still remains the principle threat. For this reason, superficial issues aside, there is in actual fact a high degree of cooperation between KSA, the US and Israel in addressing threats emanating in the region from Iran.
- Moving forward, there were a number of key differences that continue to remain, especially as KSA for its part, sees things differently than the US (especially on Syria and Libya).
- US would have preferred seeing MBS on the fringes - something that was near impossible to arrange.
- However, both sides did manage to get something from these meetings that were influenced a great deal by logistics and spin.
- An important outcome of these meetings were the technological cooperation which MBS was able to secure - something very much related to his overall economic strategy for Vision 2030.

