

“CAN BIDEN'S VISIT CREATE A LASTING RECALIBRATION IN THE U.S.-SAUDI PARTNERSHIP”



SUMMARY OF A ‘AGSIW WEBINAR



21 JUNE 2022



OVERVIEW

On Tuesday June 21, AGSIW hosted a discussion moderated by Hussein Ibish (Senior Resident Scholar, AGSIW) on President Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s planned visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and implications for U.S.-Saudi relations.

After a rocky start to U.S.-Saudi relations, President Biden will embark on a trip to the Middle East with a planned stop in Saudi Arabia. The visit to Riyadh is likely to be particularly consequential, as Biden’s meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will signal that Washington – contrary to previous ambiguities - is ready to work with the crown prince as the heir apparent of an indispensable Middle East partner.

Urgent policy issues are also at stake. Sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine have driven gas prices to near-record highs. Biden is no doubt hoping to get Saudi Arabia to increase oil production and lower the cost to Americans at the pump before the November midterm elections. Additionally, with nuclear negotiations in Vienna at a seeming stalemate, Washington must look to alternative strategies to deal with Iran that will require close coordination with regional partners, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.

For their part, KSA will in return for any compliance to US requests, no doubt seek a renewed U.S. commitment to their security as they face numerous threats, mainly from Iran and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The AGSIW webinar with the participation of a number of regional experts, provided a cursory glance on such issues as an updated security guarantee from the United States coupled with potential new levels of Saudi cooperation on energy pricing. The webinar also touched on how much common ground the two countries shared with regards to perceived threats

from Russia and Iran as well as the possibility of normalization in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

KEY POINTS MADE BY THE SPEAKERS

Prior to giving the floor to the speakers, Hussein Ibish provided an added overview by saying that Biden's sagging fortune at home as a result of failure on delivering any of his ambitious domestic promises had undergone a major transformation in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which has undoubtedly been the biggest threat posed to European security since the 1930s.

While it was unclear how long the current unity against Russia would hold out, the only other factor that could come to Biden's assistance for lifting his chances in the upcoming midterm Congressional elections would be to achieve a measure of success in the aftermath of his impending trip to the Middle East. That would entail restoring a semblance of normality with the KSA while encouraging regional dialogue and finally by possibly arriving at some form of a nuclear deal with Iran – as remote as that may seem at this time.

The upcoming challenge for Biden would be to come up with a new agenda of deterrence and containment against Iran which meant the creation of new bloc in the region that was united in purpose against Iranian agitations and ambitions in the shorter term and China in the longer term. Biden also needed to try and move the needle on the Palestinian issue for the sake of clearing the way for some kind of a Saudi-Israel entente which might ultimately allow KSA to join the Abraham Accords.

1. **MOHAMMED ALYAHYA** (*Senior Non-Resident Fellow, Hudson Institute*)

- A new discourse in Saudi-US relationship was needed to replace the traditional and much resented view the US has always had of KSA: “Am ATM machine and a gas station”.
- The high point of US-Saudi relations when the two countries shared unity of purpose came to an end with the ending of the Cold War some 30 years ago. Since then, the relationship has been on downward slope – something that needed to be addressed, especially as the KSA was now going through a period of massive internal transformation – something that was a model for

the region and good for the US (especially in face of Iran) thus needing to be supported more robustly by the US.

- Human rights are important but not to the level that US should try and interfere in KSA domestic affairs. Saudi Arabia, for example, has serious moral reservations about transgender operations and activities in the US but does not make an issue out of it....
- A result of such US pressures and berating of KSA has been that it has created a situation whereby the youth are increasingly looking towards China.
- This is at a time when people not just in KSA but the region as a whole are highly confused about what America ultimately wants.
- The Palestine issue is and will remain important for the KSA. Hence, any action towards giving recognition to Israel will depend on how the needle is moved on the Palestinian issue by the Israelis.
- It is true that urgency of the Palestinian issue has subsided for many regional states having to fend off against other emerging threats, but for ordinary people the issue is still important as they care and hold Israel responsible for the chaos.

2. **DANIELLE PLETKA** (*Distinguished Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute*)

- Unclear whether this is really an inflection point in US-Saudi Ties.
- MBS wants to take the youth in his country beyond where they had been previously with more freedoms (especially for women) and economic opportunities.
- To do this, it was important to offer opportunities of employment to these people – something the KSA was not very good at in the execution area.
- “Although Biden has woken up and smelled the coffee by realizing that the Jamal Khashoggi issue was not everything in the Gulf”, he would turn and give in to Iran if they gave him the slightest of winks!
- Thus, this visit will be nothing more than “a complete gas station visit”.
- Nothing important is likely to come out of the visit by Biden to KSA.

3. **BRIAN KATUKIS** (*Senior Fellow, Vice President of Policy, Middle East Institute*)

- A lot of things may yet happen before Biden arrives in the KSA.
- Biden had wanted to recalibrate ties with the KSA, having said that many times during the campaign, but nothing really happened in the first year of his office.

- Just as Biden has no Plan B for Iran if his Plan A (which is to reach a nuclear agreement) fails, Biden's Plan A with the Saudis aimed at ending the war in Yemen has also failed to materialize irrespective of the current tenuous ceasefire.
- Nonetheless, there is a realization on both sides that bi-lateral consolidation is important especially on challenging regional issues related to security.
- Although Biden will come face to face with MBS, it is impossible for him not to make reference to human rights and somehow bring up the Khashoggi issue.
- Biden will also sample new problems such as the effect which Russian narrative is having with the Saudi leadership, despite the fact that since the start of the Ukraine war, Russia had overtaken KSA as the main oil supplier to China.
- A part of the conversation between Biden and Saudi leaders will no doubt also focus on trying to advance Saudi-Israeli ties and seeing if the Biden Administration might get to gain some of the glory associated with the Abraham Accords.
- However, in the aftermath of the fall of the Israeli government and the continued 'directionless policies of the Palestinian Authority', prospects of progress in this area at best look very bleak bearing in mind that Abu Mazen is a problem and Israel has very little to give (with the result leading to Iran become more empowered to consolidate its mischief).
- The Palestinian issue is not a priority for any party, especially for the Biden Administration for whom the Middle East in its first year did not even feature in its top 10 foreign policy priorities.

