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Biden's Middle East Tour: Motives and Strategic Calculations

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The White House announced that President Biden will embark on a regional tour of the Middle East from 13 - 16 July 2022, including Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Saudi Arabia, where he will participate in a summit that includes the GCC leaders, in addition to Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. This will involve a virtual summit while in Jeddah, bringing together leaders of the new economic group known as I2-U2, which includes, in addition to the United States, India, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Biden's decision to visit Saudi Arabia and meet with Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, sparked debate in Congress, particularly among Democrats and human rights organizations.¹ The objectives of the visit is also under scrutiny: is it mainly related to oil prices, or will it also address issues of Gulf normalization with Israel?

Motivations

Biden's visit comes as part of Washington's efforts to contain China and deal with the repercussions of the West's imposition of harsh economic sanctions on Russia due to its invasion of Ukraine, which include the energy sector, causing a spike in the cost of fuel, thus deepening the global economic inflation crisis, in a world that has not yet recovered from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The inflation rate in the United States now stands at 8.6 percent, its highest in the last forty years, leading to a sharp rise in the prices of food, basic commodities, and luxury. With the threat stagflation, Democrats may pay the price for the ongoing crisis in the midterm elections scheduled for November 2022.

While Washington aims to strike a huge blow to the Russian energy sector and deprive Moscow of its revenues, it needs, in turn, to persuade the Gulf states, specifically Saudi Arabia, to increase oil production to compensate for the shortage resulting from the Russia sanctions.² However, the Biden administration is also concerned about the growing relations between its traditional allies in the region and Russia and China, especially as doubts grow about the US commitment to their security.³

The Biden administration hopes that the visit to Saudi Arabia will also facilitate a discussion on ways to end the war in Yemen, where the fragile truce has entered its third month. They also hope to advance the Arab Israeli normalization process, in an extension of the Trump era "Abraham Accords." In reference to this, the plane that will take Biden from Tel Aviv to Jeddah be direct, using the same route that Trump took in 2017, when he flew directly from Riyadh to Tel Aviv.

Moreover, the issue of the stalled nuclear negotiations with Iran and the latter's acceleration of uranium enrichment levels will also be an important topic on Biden's agenda in Israel and Saudi Arabia. His administration seeks to achieve two goals here: the first is to put pressure on Israel, which enjoys

¹ Ishaan Tharoor, "The Case for and against Biden Visiting Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Post*, 15/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3y3DLR4>.

² Katherine Fung, "Biden Shouldn't Rely on Saudi Arabia to Fix Gas Prices: Energy Executive," *Newsweek*, 15/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3n2peP5>.

³ Elise Labott, "How Biden Came Around to MBS' Plan for a New U.S.-Saudi Partnership," *Politico*, 15/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://politi.co/3QAVdUb>.



tacit support from some Gulf countries, specifically the UAE and Bahrain, to avoid doing anything could lead to further escalation in the region, with Israeli media recently reporting that Tel Aviv has deployed a radar system in the Emirates and Bahrain. The second is to coordinate positions with Israel and some Gulf parties regarding how to deal with Iran, with or without a nuclear agreement, so as not to repeat the experience of the 2015 agreement, which Israel tried to sabotage, and aroused deep dissatisfaction from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.⁴

At the Palestinian-Israeli level, officials in the Biden administration claim that his visit will be an opportunity to restore a more balanced US role between the Palestinians and Israelis, and an occasion to reaffirm US support for the two-state solution, following the Trump era's unprecedented bias in favour of Israel. To the dismay of many, the Biden administration supported the current Israeli government simply because it is not led by Benjamin Netanyahu, despite its president, Naftali Bennett openly boasting even more extreme views than Netanyahu, and has not shown a real interest in resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. The Biden administration has been in power for a year and a half and no serious effort has been made to curb Israeli violations of the Palestinians, to halt settlement operations and house demolitions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the all the while the siege on the Gaza Strip continues.

The Biden administration has maintained many of the Trump administration's policies, such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, not returning the US embassy to Tel Aviv, and has not opened the US consulate in East Jerusalem, nor the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington. During his visit to Israel, according to officials in his administration, Biden will be keen to show his commitment to its security, which will include visiting some of its defence systems that were provided or funded by the United States.⁵

Resetting US-Saudi Relations

Resetting the US relationship with Saudi Arabia is one of the most prominent goals of Biden's visit to the region, as he himself stated, after the marked tension since he assumed the presidency in early 2021, especially since he pledged during his election campaign to be tough with Saudi Arabia on Yemen and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, as well as other human rights violations. After his election as president, Biden refused to deal with the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and limited communication with his father, King Salman. Then he announced the cessation of US support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen war and prohibited them from acquiring "offensive weapons."⁶ This was followed by the declassification of a CIA report that implicitly alluded to Mohammed bin Salman personally responsible for the order to kill Khashoggi, and the imposition

⁴ Mohammad Watd, "The Israeli Radar System in Bahrain and the UAE... Strengthening Gulf Security or Increasing Tension?", *Al Jazeera*, 11/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3N6n00H>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



of sanctions on those responsible for the crime, excluding bin Salman. Moreover, under pressure from the relatives of the victims of the September 11 attacks, who accuse the Saudi government of being directly involved in them, Biden also allowed the FBI documents to be declassified, even though they did not contain any concrete evidence to support these allegations.⁷

In February 2021, the Biden administration also reversed Trump's designation of the Houthis as terrorist organisation.⁸ In September of the same year, Washington withdrew Patriot missiles from Saudi Arabia at a time when it was exposed to repeated Houthi attacks with ballistic missiles and drones. Since Biden was inaugurated as president, Riyadh has met many American demands, including intensifying efforts to end the war in Yemen, trying to modernize the country, weakening the influence of clerics and granting women more rights, and opening a dialogue with Iran in parallel to the negotiations underway in Vienna, as well as deepening contacts and cooperation with Israel. But the Biden administration, Saudi officials say, in turn, did not appreciate those steps and continued to demand more, such as taking in Afghan refugees, helping the faltering economy in Lebanon, or providing support for the stability of Iraq...etc.⁹

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the global economy has prompted the Biden administration to reconsider its approach to the relationship with Saudi Arabia, attempting to strike a balance between values and interests in US foreign policy..¹⁰

Officials in the Biden administration justify the shift in Biden's attitude towards Saudi Arabia by claiming he is looking at things differently as president now, especially since he is currently focused on the issues of the war in Ukraine and its implications for the energy market. , which requires the cooperation of Saudi Arabia. In addition, Washington fears that the continuation of its estrangement from Mohammed bin Salman will bring Saudi Arabia closer to Russia and China. Ibn Salman recently invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has leaked information that it is ready to pay for part of its oil exports to China in Yuan, in an indication of the growing cooperation between the two countries. It is worth mentioning here that the head of the CIA, William Burns, visited Riyadh in April 2022, to remedy the deterioration in the relationship and persuade it to cancel a major deal to buy weapons from China, including ballistic missiles.¹¹

Washington's European allies, such as British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, have encouraged Biden to end the feud with Mohammed bin Salman. Since that time, the two sides began to show signs of improved relations. The Biden administration praised a number of steps taken by Saudi Arabia,

⁷ Olivier Knox & Caroline Anders, "Biden's Saudi Trip isn't the Outlier. His 'Pariah' Comment Was," *The Washington Post*, 15/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3n75tGq>.

⁸ Zeke Miller, "Biden Revokes Terrorist Designation for Yemen's Houthis," *Associated Press*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ObadX8>.

⁹ Labott.

¹⁰ "Biden Approach to Saudi Arabia Echoes Bush's China Policy after Tiananmen Square." *Al-Monitor*, 17/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3HBX5bj>.

¹¹ Labott.



including its agreement, in early June 2022, to extend the armistice brokered by the United Nations in Yemen, in early April, for a period of two months¹² This was followed by the announcement by the “OPEC +” group, led by Saudi Arabia, that it will raise oil production in July and August, by about 250 thousand barrels, in addition to the 400 thousand barrels stipulated in the agreement to gradually raise production. Washington hopes that Saudi Arabia will make a larger increase throughout the year, given its unfulfilled oil production capacity.¹³ On the other hand, Riyadh is demanding a clear US commitment to Saudi security, re-designate the Houthis a terrorist group, and no more surprises from Washington, especially with regard to nuclear negotiations with Iran, as well as a rollback of US criticism regarding Saudi Arabia’s human rights record. Although Biden confirmed that he would not change his view on the issue of human rights, when questioned on this, he said “but as President of the United States, my job is to bring peace if I can.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The Biden administration has not deviated from the historically realist approach in US politics, in which strategic, economic, and electoral interests take precedence over everything else. Despite criticism by a number of Democrats and human rights organizations for what they see as Biden’s negligence of his commitment to holding human rights violators accountable, the global geopolitical data, in the estimation of his administration officials, is too big and dangerous to be reduced to electoral promises and slogans. However, several critics argue that tolerance of human rights issues only emboldens abusers, and that the administration’s approach to energy is based on flimsy assumptions; The ability of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to compensate for Russian oil exports is exaggerated, and Saudi Arabia cannot abandon its dependence on US weapons as it cannot afford to convert its military structures based on US weapons systems to Chinese or Russian ones.¹⁵ However, it does not seem that the Biden administration is ready to take a risk, no matter how small, given the prevailing international context, where most of its focus is on weakening Russia, containing China, and preventing the US economy from entering a recession — however conflicting these goals may appear.

¹² “Biden Welcomes Yemen Truce Extension, Notes Saudi Arabia’s ‘Courageous Leadership,’” *Reuters*, 2/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3N6CAV5>.

¹³ Scott Detrow, “Biden will Visit Saudi Arabia in July, a Nation he had once Called a ‘Pariah,’” *NPR*, 14/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://n.pr/3zRIORc>

¹⁴ “Remarks by President Biden on the May Jobs Report,” The White House, 3/6/2022, accessed on 21/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3xHPryf>

¹⁵ Tharoor.