

“THE FUTURE OF THE U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP”



SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE’ WEBINAR 14 OCTOBER 2022



OVERVIEW

According to White House national security spokesperson John Kirby last week, President Joe Biden will consider re-evaluating the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia after the latter’s decision, along with other ‘OPEC+’ members, to cut oil production by two million barrels per day. Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle have also called for stopping American arms sales and military support to the kingdom.

For their part, Saudi officials, have stated that their government’s decision was not a political one but one that was purely driven by long-term economic considerations.

A MEI webinar moderated by Bilal Y, Saab (*Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense and Security Program at MEI*) with the participation of an experienced panel of experts looked at the ramification of these recent developments and its impact, given the growing level of mistrust that has recently led to a state of crisis in the relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

KEY POINTS MADE BY THE SPEAKERS

1. **BRUCE REIDEL** (*Senior Fellow and Director of the Intelligence Project, Brookings Institution*)
 - MBS is clearly the focus of all attention in the US following the recent decision by OPEC+ to cut oil production by 2mbd (though the actual amount cut will more realistically be no more than 800,000 b/d, which is still quite substantial).
 - The part played by KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) is seen as nothing other than a snub towards the US and President Biden in particular who has been made to look bad. Had this decision been made 2 months later – i.e., in the aftermath of the mid-term elections, the impact on US-KSA ties would have been far less noticeable.

- The view from Washington is now one that decision making in KSA which was traditionally made on a consensual basis by the leading royals is now one which is being made exclusively by MBS is what is nothing more than a “one man show”.
- Furthermore, the view in Washington is that the KSA has under MBS moved more and more towards becoming an autocratic police state with increasing levels of human rights violations as best exemplified by the much-publicized harsh punishment that has been meted out to women bloggers and social media users.
- Moreover, the US has seen no moderation in MBS and as such relations between the two states have deteriorated to levels last seen in 1973 when the Saudis imposed an oil embargo on the US causing a serious crisis and economic depression.
- On this occasion, the deterioration of problems between the two states has more to do with personality issues than just policy with Joe Biden being made to look like a ‘soccer’ who has been seriously embarrassed by MBS.
- It is also a fact that MBS’s mentor, MBZ (UAE’s Mohammed bin Zayed) had also gone with the recent decision in Vienna and had subsequently travelled to Moscow where he was filmed in the company of Vladimir Putin in whose favour the decision to cut oil productions is believed to have happened.
- But policy makers in Washington are convinced that various aspects of US-KSA ties and relations is far more important in every way for KSA than for the US, especially on matters pertaining to security given that neither China nor Russia are capable of providing KSA with the needs it may have in that department.
- In the US, ultimate decision making will deal with factors not related to bilateral relations - e.g., decisions that are made in Congress or the Democratic Party like pronouncements such as those made by Senator Menendez that he will not support further arms sales to Saudi Arabia - are bound to have a serious adverse impact.
- Legal actions proceeding against MBS and KSA in US courts because of charges that are being pursued by the Khashoggi family will also complicate matters in the coming months, given that the Biden administration will have to decide whether ‘Sovereign immunity’ can or should be applied to MBS.
- While President Biden can say ‘no’ to the question of Sovereign immunity, it is a fact that expectations from him are much more.

- Curtailment of military-military cooperation, especially in the area of delivering spare parts can seriously harm KSA, in circumstances that the US is well aware that MBS has a great deal of domestic enemies in powerful areas including the Wahabi religious establishment .
- Although only 37 at this time, there are powerful forces in KSA who do not wish to see him around for the next 50 years. As such, it is quite possible for him to be debunked just as King Saud was in the early 1960s.
- MBS is himself, personally, well of aware of this reality and that is why he keeps himself safely guarded.

2. **JOANNE HELD CUMMINGS** (*Distinguished Senior Fellow on National Security at MEI and previously the POLAD (Foreign Policy Advisor) to the Combined Joint Task Force against ISIS (CJTF-OIR) from 2018 to 2020 at the US State Department*)

- There have been a number of issues such as 911, the murder of Khashoggi, Yemen, human rights and now oil policy that have been of serious concern with regards to US-KSA relations to Washington in recent years.
- There have been a broad range of critical voices in the US that have addressed these issues, while in Saudi Arabia, voices essentially point to the fact that all Saudi actions have been carried out in pursuit of their national interests with no action ever deliberately aimed at the US.
- However, it is imperative for the US to understand and bear in mind what are the changes that they are seeking and what the implication of those changes are likely to be for all the various parties concerned.
- Given that the US at present has a large military and commercial presence in KSA, it is a given fact that any changes made are likely to have both short term and long-term consequences.
- It is also obvious that MBS is wishing to diversify his options and as such does not want to be told what to do (especially vis-à-vis the recent decisions made in Vienna which resulted in higher oil prices and as such more money for Russia as well).
- However, MBS and Saudi Arabia are not the same thing. In this regard, the loss of consensus in the royal family is a major issue worthy of concern.
- Finally, it is important for Washington to also take note of the fact that any change in US-KSA relations is likely to also have a profound impact on US ties with all the other countries of the region including Iran.

- There is at this time, bipartisan support in the US for moving against KSA, with the Republicans especially eager to demonstrate Biden's failures in his dealings with MBS
3. **KEVIN DONEGAN** (*Distinguished Senior Fellow on National Security at MEI. He was previously a Vice Admiral in the US Navy and commander of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet*)
- The US must look very carefully as it makes its next moves, bearing in mind that it needs the support of the Saudis on many numbers of regional issues such as, most importantly, dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).
 - For the US to implement policies such as sanctions or dealing with various defence issues, the help of KSA at the regional level is crucial and without Saudi help, given their alignment with other regional states, any progress in attaining those objectives will become much more difficult.
 - Policy makers in Washington need to also take into account that despite certain recent concerns, the Saudis have cooperated a great range of other critical issues over the past decades that have helped the free flow of commerce and moved away from considerations such as awarding 5G concessions to China (HUAWE) while also having voted with the West against Russia over the Ukraine issue at the United Nations.
 - Furthermore, it is important to take into account that the jury on oil policy is still out and hence it is more prudent to avoid making knee jerk reactions, especially since US government reaction would undoubtedly have been quite different if the recent Vienna decision had been made a month after the upcoming mid-term elections!
 - For those US policy makers lining up to criticize MBS and the Saudis at this time, it is important to note that contrary to general expectations, the US for its part did nothing whatsoever to help or counter the attacks that had been directed against KSA and UAE by Iran and its regional proxies (e.g., the drone attacks against Saudi Aramco oil facilities).
 - Ultimately, both MBS and MBZ want to be with the US and do not see Russia or China as a viable alternative.
 - Finally, there is no doubt that any curtailment of US-KSA and US-UAE ties will only work in favour of both China and Iran in the region.



