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Saudi Arabia Is Sending Joe Biden Mixed Messages

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Arabia appears to be drawing lines in the sand as the kingdom prepares for a new era in relations with the US once President-elect Joe Biden assumes office in January. The kingdom is seemingly signaling that it is willing to go only so far to get off on the right foot with the Biden administration.

Saudi Arabia seems to be betting that Joe Biden will be sufficiently cautious to avoid a rupture in relations with the kingdom despite criticism he expressed, at times in strong language, during the US presidential election campaign.

The Saudi bet is not unreasonable.

US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback recently echoed existing US policy, which could well be the attitude adopted by a Biden administration. Asked why Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave the kingdom a waiver even though Brownback's department had designated the kingdom a "country of particular concern" under US law for its failure to respect freedom of religion, as well as its apostasy and blasphemy laws, which include the death penalty, he said:

Saudi Arabia is a country that the administration and prior administrations have deemed as having a strategic interest... It's the major, obviously, Gulf state country. It's a major source of trade... We have a great deal of frustration at times in what Saudi Arabia does... But there's also a national interest here, and that's something that you've always have to weigh back and forth in diplomacy. And in this case, the Secretary weighed it that we needed to provide the national interest waiver.

Recent events indicate the parameters of the Saudi bet.

The kingdom seems prepared to accommodate both outgoing President Donald Trump as well as Biden by engaging with US and Kuwaiti efforts to lift the 3.5-year-old Saudi- and UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar.

Secretary Pompeo, Jared Kushner (Trump's Middle East negotiator), and other senior US officials have traveled to the Gulf in recent weeks to push for a breakthrough in the Gulf stalemate as well as Saudi recognition of Israel in the wake of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and the Jewish state.

Kuwaiti, Saudi, and Qatari officials have said they were progressing toward a resolution as Gulf leaders gear up for a summit of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which groups the region's monarchies. The UAE, alongside Bahrain and Egypt, which has joined the boycott, indicated support for an end to the dispute.

At the same time, recent Saudi actions send the message that recognition of Israel and human rights issues are red lines the kingdom will not cross, at least for now.

Shortly after the visits by Pompeo and Kushner, the kingdom sentenced Walid Fitaihi, a Harvard-trained doctor and dual US-Saudi citizen, to six years in prison for allegedly tweeting his support for the 2011 popular Arab revolts and for obtaining US citizenship while studying in America. The Trump administration has repeatedly raised his case with Saudi authorities, including during the recent high-level US visits.

Similarly, on the eve of November's virtual G20 summit of the world's largest economies hosted by King Salman, Saudi Arabia transferred to a terrorism court the case of Loujain Hathloul, one of 12 women's rights activists accused of conspiring with foreign organizations hostile to the kingdom. The move came amid a groundswell of calls for their release in advance of the summit, and the court's first hearing in Hathloul's case was held on the day designated by the UN as International Human Rights Day.

At about the same time, a campaign on Twitter, believed to have been instigated by the government, accused detained former crown prince and interior minister Muhammad bin Nayef of plotting to topple his successor, Muhammad bin Salman. The campaign was in response to concern expressed by British parliamentarians and Nayef's lawyers about his circumstances.

Saudi Arabia's moves contrast starkly with those of the UAE, which appears to be anticipating expected changes in US foreign policy once Biden takes office.

Having already pleased both the outgoing and incoming US presidents by becoming the first Arab state to recognize Israel since 1994, the UAE said it is launching a review to strengthen its human rights framework.

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said the review would focus on women's empowerment, humanitarian aid, religious tolerance, and workers' rights. The official made no mention of political rights such as the freedoms of expression and assembly, which are one focus of criticism of the UAE by human rights groups.

By contrast, in what appeared to be another shot across Biden's bow and rejection of Trump administration pressure, former Saudi intelligence chief and ex-ambassador to Britain and the US Prince Turki bin Faisal launched a blistering attack on Israel.

Speaking days before Morocco and Israel announced the establishment of diplomatic relations between their two countries, Prince Turki described the Jewish state as "the last of the Western colonizing powers in the Middle East."

He charged that Palestinians were "incarcerated in concentration camps under the flimsiest of security accusations— young and old, women and men, who are rotting there without recourse to justice."

It was not clear whether Prince Turki's remarks reflected not only King Salman's sentiments but also that of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who reportedly met recently with Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu.

A recent public opinion poll suggested that Saudis are divided in their attitudes toward relations and commercial and cultural exchanges with Israel.

Forty-one percent of those surveyed in September saw relations with Israel as a positive development while 54 percent were opposed. Yet the percentage of those who favored commercial and sports exchanges jumped substantially to 37 percent compared to nine percent in a poll three months earlier.

Prince Turki made his remarks as the kingdom was seeking to lower tensions with Turkey, a major challenger of Saudi leadership of the Muslim world. Ankara, like Riyadh, is uncertain about what its relationship with the US will be once Biden takes office.

If Saudi Arabia moves to implicitly acknowledge that relations with the US could become rocky, rapprochement with Turkey suggests that Riyadh and Ankara see virtue in seeking common shelter. That could prove to be a fragile structure in a part of the world where the sands are always shifting.

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