



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Russian FM's Gulf Tour: A Bellwether of US-Saudi Relations

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,956, March 9, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As [Russian FM Sergei Lavrov](#) embarks on a four-day visit to the Gulf, Middle Eastern leaders are either struggling to get a grip on Joe Biden's recalibration of US policy in the region or signaling their refusal to adapt to the president's approach.

Russian FM Sergei Lavrov's visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar comes a week after the US released an [intelligence report](#) that pointed fingers at Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman for allegedly ordering the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Earlier, the US halted the sale of weapons to the kingdom that could be deployed in its six-year-long devastating offensive in Yemen.

Lavrov is not stopping in Istanbul or Jerusalem. His visit to the region comes at a time with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is still waiting for a phone call from Biden, and Israel is suggesting that it might not engage with US efforts to revive the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program and could act on its own to counter the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions.

Lavrov is certain to want to capitalize on Biden's rattling of Middle Eastern cages amid perceptions that an American recalibration of relations with Saudi Arabia and delayed phone calls suggest that the US is downgrading the Middle East's importance in its global strategy, reducing its security commitments, and potentially considering a withdrawal.

There is little doubt that the US wants a restructuring of its commitments through greater burden-sharing and regional cooperation, but it is unlikely to abandon the Middle East altogether.

The question is whether Biden's cage-rattling is signaling US intentions or a deliberate attempt to let problematic allies and partners stew in uncertainty in a bid to increase the administration's leverage.

The longer-term strategy could be an unintended yet beneficial consequence of the administration's conviction that addressing domestic emergencies such as the pandemic and economic crisis as well as repairing relations with America's traditional allies in Europe and Asia is a prerequisite for restoring US influence and leverage that was damaged by former President Donald Trump.

If so, Lavrov may unwittingly be doing the Biden administration a favor by attempting to exploit perceived daylight between the US and its allies to push a Russian plan for a restructured security architecture.

That plan envisions a Middle Eastern security conference modeled on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and a regional non-aggression pact that would be guaranteed by the US, China, Russia, and India.

In doing so, Lavrov would be preparing the ground for debate about a concept that has been discussed in different forms at various points by US officials, in which a US that is credibly getting its house in order would retain its dominant position as the military backbone of a new security architecture.

It would also drive home the point that neither Russia nor China is willing or capable of replacing the US and that Middle Eastern countries are likely to benefit most from an architecture that allows them to diversify their relationships and potentially play one against the other.

It is early days, but so far, Saudi Arabia has insisted "that the partnership between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America is a robust and enduring partnership" even though it rejected in the same statement the US intelligence report as "negative, false and unacceptable."

For now, Saudi Arabia appears determined to counter strong winds in the White House as well as Congress rather than rush to Moscow and Beijing in a realignment of its geopolitical and security relationships.

To do so, the kingdom, in the run-up to the release of the report, has broadened its public relations and lobbying campaign to focus beyond Washington's Beltway politics on America's heartland where fewer people are likely to follow either the grim reality of the war in Yemen, a country that the Saudi-led bombing campaign has turned into world's worst humanitarian crisis, or the gruesome details of Mr. Khashoggi's killing.

The campaign appears designed to create grassroots empathy for Saudi Arabia across the US that would filter back from constituents to members of Congress.

"We recognize that Americans outside Washington are interested in developments in Saudi Arabia and many, including the business community, academic institutions and various civil society groups, are keen on maintaining long-standing relations with the kingdom or cultivating new ones," said Fahad Nazer, a spokesman for the Saudi embassy in Washington.

Filings show that companies lobbying on behalf of Saudi Arabia reported that half of their 2,000 lobbying contacts in the last year were with individuals and groups outside Washington.

Working with [local and regional companies](#) outside the US capital, including Larson Shannahan Slifka Group (LS2 Group) in Iowa and its subcontractors in Maine, Georgia, North Carolina, and other states, Saudi lobbyists contacted local chambers of commerce, media, women's groups, and faith communities, including synagogues.

The lobbyists distributed materials touting the benefits to women in sports and other sectors accrued from Prince Muhammad's social reforms in a country that banned women from driving as recently as three years ago.

The Saudi focus is unlikely to deter Lavrov from peddling Russian military hardware during his tour of the Gulf, including the S-400 anti-missile defense system that Saudi Arabia expressed interest in long before the US election that swept Biden into the White House.

The kingdom has not taken its interest any further so far. Whether it does so during this week's visit by Lavrov will serve as a bellwether of whether Saudi Arabia will turn toward Russia and China in a significant way.

So far US analysts appear unconcerned.

Said former US intelligence official Paul Pillar, a frequent commentator on Middle East affairs: "The attractiveness of doing business with the United

States will remain without the coddling, as is true of Saudi choices regarding arms purchases, given that their defenses have been built largely around US hardware.”

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.