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Playing Politics: Saudi Arabia Targets Middle America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Amid Washington chatter about the future of US-Saudi relations, the kingdom has launched an unprecedented public diplomacy campaign to marshal business and grassroots support beyond the Beltway to counter anti-Saudi sentiment in the Biden administration and Congress.

In a striking move, the Saudi embassy in Washington has hired a lobbying and public relations firm headquartered in the American heartland rather than the capital. Iowa-based Larson Shannahan Slifka Group (LS2 Group) was contracted for \$126,500 a month to reach out to local media, business, and women's groups as well as world affairs councils in far-flung states. "We are real people who tackle real issues," LS2 Group says on its website.

Embassy spokesman Fahad Nazar told *USA Today* in an email that "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."

Prince Abdul Rahman Bin Musai'd al Saud, a grandson of the kingdom's founder, King Abdulaziz, businessman and former head of one of Saudi Arabia's foremost soccer clubs, framed US interests—particularly regarding human rights—in far blunter terms.

Saudi Arabia "carries significant economic weight and it influences the region. The world cannot do without Saudi moderation. Because of its economy, its moderation, and its cooperation in the war on terror... the truth is that [you need us more than we need you](#)," Prince Abdul Rahman said.

To boost the Saudi public diplomacy effort, the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Riyadh armed LS2 Group with a 32-page report entitled "The US-Saudi Economic Relationship: More than Arms and Oil," which highlights the kingdom's investments in the US, commercial dealings, gifts to universities, and purchases of US Treasury securities.

The report noted that \$24 billion in US exports to Saudi Arabia in 2019, \$3.1 billion of which were arms sales, supported 165,000 American jobs. US companies were working on Saudi projects worth \$700 billion. The report said the kingdom held \$134.4 billion in US Treasury securities and \$12.8 billion in US stocks at the end of 2020 while US investment in Saudi Arabia in 2019 totaled \$10.8 billion. It touted future investment opportunities in sectors such as entertainment, where US companies have a competitive advantage.

In reaching out to the American heartland, Saudi Arabia hopes to garner sympathy among segments of society that are less focused on foreign policy and/or the intricacies of the Middle East than politicians in Washington and the chattering classes on both coasts of the US.

President Biden criticized Saudi Arabia during his election campaign in stark terms, [calling the kingdom a "pariah."](#) Since taking office, Biden has halted the sale of offensive arms to Saudi Arabia that could be deployed in the six-year-old war in Yemen, released an intelligence report that pointed fingers at Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman for the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and announced that he will "recalibrate" relations with the Gulf state.

The Saudi public diplomacy campaign comes as President Biden is under pressure from liberals and left-wing Democrats to sanction Prince Muhammad for the Khashoggi killing, define what he means by offensive arms sales, and potentially maneuver to prevent the Crown Prince from becoming king.

Prominent among the speakers being rolled out by LS2 Group is Saudi Arabia's glamorous ambassador to the US, Princess Reema bint Bandar, the kingdom's first-ever female foreign envoy. Princess Reema is a great granddaughter of the kingdom's founder and the US-raised daughter of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who was ambassador in Washington for 22 years.

Long active in the promotion of women's sport, Princess Reema hopes to convince her interlocutors that Saudi Arabia, as a pivotal global player, is an

asset to the US that has embarked on far-reaching economic and social liberalization, including the institutionalization of women's rights.

It is a message designed to put the kingdom's best foot forward and distract from its abominable human rights record, symbolized by the Khashoggi killing and the war in Yemen.

If successful, the public diplomacy strategy could encourage grassroots organizations in Congressional districts to lean on their political representatives in Washington to adopt more lenient attitudes toward Saudi Arabia.

That message would be aligned with positions adopted by the Israel lobby, various American Jewish organizations, and other groups supportive of the kingdom.

According to Philadelphia World Affairs Council president Lauren Swartz and Alaska World Affairs Council president and CEO Lise Falskow, both of whose memberships include business leaders, students, educators, and other local residents interested in foreign affairs, [the strategy is paying off](#).

"There was a huge message of change and progress. That is ... not much reported in the newspapers here... (Princess Reema) had all her data points about Saudi Arabia's impact, opportunity and connections to Pennsylvania," including links to the state's energy industry, Swartz said after the ambassador addressed her group on Zoom.

"Being an oil country and Alaska being an oil state, it's interesting to hear their perspective on gas and world markets and living in the neighborhood they do—and her being a woman," Falskow added.

A 10-page glossy booklet produced by the LS2 Group in advance of Princess Reema's appearances emphasized the kingdom's "great progress in the area of women and sports."

Replete with pictures of women athletes, some with headscarves and some without, the publication highlights their achievements as well as significant policy changes and incorporation of women in sports management as part of Prince Muhammad's reforms.

The public diplomacy strategy is counting on Middle America being less tuned in to other aspects of the Crown Prince's rule.

This would likely include the sentencing of [Nassima Sada](#), a prominent Shiite women's rights activist, to five years in prison, two of which will be suspended, according to an allegedly Qatari-backed, London-based news outlet. The suspension means that Sada, one of 12 women campaigners arrested in 2018, could be released at the end of June.

The engagements arranged by LS2 Group outside Washington contrast starkly with the high-brow webinars hosted by Washington think tanks, at which a revolving array of former administration officials, scholars, and analysts debate what US policy toward Saudi Arabia should be. They are usually split down the middle on whether the US can afford to be tough on Saudi Arabia and Prince Muhammad on issues such as human rights.

Even so, if public opinion polls in recent years are anything to go by, Saudi public diplomacy faces significant challenges. Gallup concluded last year that 65% of Americans viewed Saudi Arabia unfavorably versus 34% favorably, a trend that was also evident in surveys by Business Insider and [YouGov](#).

Recognizing the hurdles, Princess Reema appears to be following her instincts by focusing on a "comprehensive partnership" with business, culture, and education.

With US activists taking credit for mounting pressure that led to Congressional censoring of US support for the war in Yemen and President Biden's suspension of arms sales, Princess Reema appears to hope that Middle America will be her secret weapon.

In other words, Middle America may be the latest battlefield, but ultimately Washington politics will determine the kingdom's image in the West and the future of US-Saudi relations.

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