



What **Biden's Visit To Saudi Arabia** Could Mean for Yemen

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REPORT



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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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Joe Biden is expected to make his first visit to the Middle East in mid-July, where he will visit leaders of traditional US allies with whom relations have been frosty since he assumed presidency in January 2021.

Biden's four-day trip will include his first stop in Israel as US President with a visit to the occupied Palestinian West Bank. Finally, Biden will conclude his visit by meeting with regional leaders and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the Saudi port city of Jeddah.

Yemen's war, which has generated the world's worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN, needs extra pressure from the international community to help end it, particularly since the UN ceasefire was extended and tensions between warring parties remain. However, Biden's visit to Jeddah may not be enough to bring peace for Yemen, as the country's conflict is once again not a top priority for Washington.

Geopolitical Concerns

There are several reasons for Biden deciding to make the visit. Firstly, Biden feels the need to cooperate with Saudi Arabia to help decrease oil prices, the rising of which has created a consumer crisis in the US and worldwide.

Biden also wants to retain the support of its traditional Middle Eastern allies amid Russia's war in Ukraine, so Washington can heap unified pressure on Russia. After all, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – a key member of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, have been warming towards Russia and strengthening their relations with Moscow throughout the invasion of Ukraine. Their stances differ from that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which has imposed financial sanctions on Moscow since it invaded Ukraine.

However, it follows a souring of ties between Riyadh and Washington under Biden's auspices. During Biden's presidential campaign in 2020, he promised to reign in on ties with Saudi Arabia over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in 2018, the country's domestic human rights record, and the kingdom's role in the war in Yemen.

Such abuses had proliferated during the presidency of Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, prompting Biden to assume the position of an 'anti-Trump' figure, particularly since Washington's ties with Riyadh became scrutinized

within Congress. However, Biden's stance created tense relations with Saudi Arabia. To counter-balance potential pressure from Washington and the prospect that the US' unconditional support may stop, Saudi Arabia has developed military contracts with Russia in 2021 and has looked set to further expand its relations with Russia.

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Still, despite Biden apparently looking for a compromise with Saudi Arabia, there are expected to be some stern words, and Biden will likely push the line that bin Salman is a “pariah” over his links to the killing of Khashoggi.

Alongside these geopolitical concerns, Biden's visit will intend to address the issue of security cooperation in the Middle East, such as countering the threats and expansion of Iran. As Iran continues to back the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the partnership between Tehran and the Houthis has deepened throughout the war, Biden may seek to somewhat placate Riyadh's own security concerns. This in turn could deepen the security partnership between Riyadh and Washington.

On the other hand, Washington has de-listed the Houthi militia in Yemen as a terrorist organization and denied Riyadh precision munitions to counter ongoing missile attacks, which the United States considered “offensive weapons.”

This means Riyadh may still be cautious over replicating Washington's support which could mean disagreements over countering Iran could continue following the meeting.

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Pressure Over Human Rights

Evidently, Biden is willing to compromise on his harsh pledges over Saudi Arabia, which may prompt further criticism over Biden's ostensible concerns for human rights. Various US Democratic senators have denounced Biden's plans as a failure to live up to his promises of reigning in on Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's leadership, particularly over the war in Yemen which he was the architect.

Several US Democratic lawmakers urged the US President that the visit must focus on "recalibrating that relationship to serve America's national interests"—reminding Biden of his promise to "recalibrate" US-Saudi relations following his stern pledges during his presidential campaign in 2020.

Even Biden's steps to reduce Washington's military support to the coalition have been deemed as futile. A report by the Government Accountability Office, which examined US weapons sales to the Saudi-led co-

alition in Yemen, said that while the Biden administration has attempted to classify Saudi Arabia's weaponry used in Yemen as either "offensive" or "defensive," US State Department officials have struggled to determine what constitutes a "defensive" weapon. Thus, while the US government

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has tried to ensure that measures are taken to create an image of pressure over the Saudi-led coalition, they may not be enough to prevent violations against civilians in Yemen.

The report also stated that although the US Department of Defense has made steps to train Saudi military officials to limit civilian casualties and uphold international law in Yemen, the DoD has never "fully measured" the level its training has enabled "civilian harm reduction" in the conflict.

Therefore, Biden's approach will likely continue attracting further criticisms over his failures to fully scale back US involvement in Yemen. Although Biden's visit may help to drive forward a short-term peace settlement, it may not be enough to address Saudi Arabia's role and hold it accountable for its involvement in Yemen, nor would it be enough to ensure Iran's involvement could be addressed.



Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia may still be hesitant to Biden's attempts to forge a rapprochement with the US. It has already shown it seeks to balance ties with both Moscow and Washington, as its close partner the UAE has done.

With Biden continuing a half-hearted attempt to pressure Saudi Arabia but

also meekly addressing human rights concerns, Riyadh may still have continued freedom to push forward with operations in Yemen.

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