The newly elected US president Joe Biden appears to be in the middle of formulating a “new” policy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. Biden has already put arms sales to the Kingdom under “procedural review”, although there is no certainty that he will actually cancel the deal at some point in the future. While the “review” appears to be a hoax, Biden still appears poised to ignore Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS). Some US Congressmen have recently called for completely ending US support for the Saudi war in Yemen. These developments, as some believe, indicate a perceptible shift in the US-Saudi ties. However, when we make an in-depth examination of how US-Saudia ties are developing and whether the Saudis are really feeling the heat from a policy shift in the US in particular, and Europe in general, what comes out is not a fundamental strategic shift, or a re-set, but a slight makeover only that shows no fundamental and substantial change or transformation, but a potential strengthening of the ties.

Even though Joe Biden has decided to ignore MBS and telephone Saudi King, it still shows that the new administration continues to attach a lot of importance to its relations with the Kingdom. Saudis, after all, have long been the largest buyers of US weapons in past few years. According to the latest report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Saudi Arabia was the world’s largest arms importer from 2015 to 2019. And, despite repeated concerns raised in the US and the UK regarding Saudi war in Yemen, a total of 73% of Saudi
Arabia’s arms imports came from the US, and 13% from the UK. In the five years before the Yemen war, the US arms transfers to Saudi Arabia amounted to $3 billion; between 2015 and 2020, however, the US agreed to sell over $64.1 billion worth of weapons to Riyadh, averaging $10.7 billion per year. Some of these deals were made when Biden was the Vice-President. As it stands, no ‘re-set’ was conceived then, nor were any “reviews” required at that time.

While the Obama-Biden administration could have stopped the war at its start in 2015 by cutting off military, diplomatic, and intelligence support for the Saudi-led coalition, it fed it instead by selling weapons.

No “reviews” were undertaken then. And, even if some states like the UK did impose a ban on sale of weapons to the Saudis, it has already been lifted. According to the latest figures released by the UK government, in the period following the restart– the quarter between July and September – the UK authorised £1.36bn worth of arms exports, of which £1.36bn were in the category that includes missiles and bombs. UK-Saudia ties are, therefore, back to the normal already.

Even as the Biden administration has decided to “review” sales, the US fundamentally remains committed to the Saudi war in Yemen. Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, made these assurance in a telephone call with Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Riyadh’s foreign minister. Blinken wrote on his tweeter that the US will “remain committed to bolstering Saudi Arabia’s defenses and finding a political settlement to the conflict in Yemen.”

The assurance came despite Biden’s announcement made only a week earlier that said that the US support for offensive operations by the Saudi-led coalition fighting the war in Yemen will no longer be available.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of US Central Command (Centcom), visited Saudia days after Biden sworn in. The core purpose of his visit was to explore the possibility of new military bases in Saudi Arabia. Using Yanbu port, as well as air bases at Tabuk and Taif along the Red Sea, would give the American military more options along a crucial waterway that has come under increased attack from suspected mine and drone boat attacks by Yemen’s Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. The US military has already conducted successful testing unloading and shipping cargo overland from Saudi Arabia’s port at Yanbu.

In an online event of the Middle East Institute, McKenzie reaffirmed that the US forces are “going to be to do things that will help them (Saudi Arabia) defend themselves more effectively and efficiently” against the common threat from Iran.

>“Over the last several weeks a number of attacks have been launched out of Yemen against Saudi Arabia,” McKenzie said, adding further “We will help the Saudis defend against those attacks by giving them intelligence when we can.”

Downplaying any damage to their relations with the Saudis due to the “review”, he said “Nothing that we did, nothing that has been said or done means we’re not going to continue to engage Saudi and our other coalition partners. Our focus there is going to be to do things that will help them defend themselves” against a common threat.

It is the common Iranian threat that led McKenzie to include Israel in the Centcom along with Arab states. Until now, Israel has belonged to the US military’s European command, or Eucom, rather than the Middle Eastern one. The decision effectively puts an end to the traditional wisdom that said Israel’s inclusion in Centcom would increase friction between the US and Arab states, and would make the latter more reluctant to share intelligence or cooperate with the Pentagon. With The Abraham Accords now in place and the fact that the path has been officially laid for an open engagement between Arab states and Israel, Israel’s inclusion in Centcom shows that the US will continue to support a unified policy towards Iran, and that the Saudis are very much a part of this plan. The search for new military bases in Saudia indicates this unambiguously. Israel accordingly called it an "opportunity to deepen cooperation with new regional partners and broaden operative horizons".

Not only will this inclusion allow for more direct military-to-military ties between Arab states and Israel, but also push more Arab states, including Saudia, into public “normalisation” with Israel.

As it stands, against the larger backdrop of the Middle Eastern geo-political landscape, the US-Saudia ties, while currently under “procedural review”, are under no significant strain that could break the alliance. The alliance, as it stands, is expanding in many ways. New US military/Centcom establishments in Saudia indicate the real strength of these ties. With the inclusion of Israel in Centcom, the unified front against Iran seems to have internally solidified in ways never seen before.
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