It appears that another scandal is brewing between Washington and Riyadh in which President Joe Biden wants to demonstrate his superiority over Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud.

The fact is that in late February, the US National Intelligence Agency published a report claiming that the operation, which resulted in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, was approved personally by the Crown Prince. "We base this assessment on the crown prince's control over decision-making in the Kingdom, the direct involvement of a key advisor and members of Mohammed bin Salman's security team in the operation, and the crown prince's support for using violent measures to silence dissidents abroad, including Khashoggi," the statement said.

Incidentally, in declassifying the report, President Biden reversed his predecessor Donald Trump's refusal to release it in violation of the 2019 law, reflecting a new US willingness to challenge the kingdom and show its superiority. In this case, however, a number of politicians believe the US president is walking a fine line as he seeks to maintain ties with the kingdom in an effort to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with its regional rival Iran and address other issues, including combating Islamist extremism and developing Arab-Israeli ties. At the same time, Washington orchestrated events to soften the blow, with Joe Biden speaking personally over phone with the crown prince's 85-year-old father, King Salman, during which the two sides said they reaffirmed their longstanding alliance and promised to continue working closely together.

Biden's new director of national intelligence, Avril Haynes, has pledged to comply with the 2019 defense law, which required her office to release within 30 days a declassified report on the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Twenty-one Saudis have since been arrested, and five high-ranking officials, including Deputy Chief of Intelligence Ahmad Asiri
and Saud al-Qahtani, a senior MBS aide, have been fired. In January 2019, 11 people were brought to closed trial. Five were given death sentences, which were commuted to 20 years in prison after they were forgiven by the journalist's family, and three others received prison terms. Ahmed Asiri was tried but acquitted "due to insufficient evidence," while Saud al-Qahtani was investigated but not charged.

As part of the rebalancing of Joe Biden's relationship with Saudi Arabia, as stated in Washington, he will communicate only with the king, which may allow Washington to set an age distance of 35 between the president and the crown prince. It would restore the protocol broken by Trump and his son-in-law, top aide Jared Kushner, who maintained a direct channel of communication with the crown prince and they resolved many issues bypassing Congress. As a matter of fact, the report was prepared during the administration of the previous US President Donald Trump, but then it was left on the back burner. Now Joe Biden wants to demonstrate his independence of policy, only where he can change the foreign policy of Donald Trump.

But it's rather clear that President Biden doesn't want to fundamentally change Washington's relationship with Riyadh after a long-awaited US intelligence report concluded that the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia endorsed the horrific political murder of Jamal Khashoggi. It seemed that the publication of the report would aggravate US-Saudi relations, or at least lead Joe Biden to harshly criticize Mohammed bin Salman. But despite promising to punish top Saudi leaders during his election campaign, the US leader refused to impose sanctions on the kingdom's crown prince. Opponents of the Riyadh government have already harshly criticized the US president for not imposing any sanctions against the Saudi prince, who in recent years has personally ordered the arrest of dozens of human rights activists and his personal opponents. Yahya Asiri, general secretary of al-Jamaa al-Watani party, stated that "the lack of sanctions against MBS and other officials means that we have to expect other crimes at any time". Many dissidents believe, rightfully so, that an international court should bring to justice all those responsible, regardless of whether they were directly involved in the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi or related to those who orchestrated the murder.

Although Secretary of State Antony Blinken later announced visa restrictions affecting 76 Saudis involved in the harassment of activists and journalists, he did not announce measures affecting the crown prince. Senior administration officials said the president has now decided that the price of "direct punishment" for MBS amid accusations that he was responsible for the murder of a Saudi journalist is too high and now is not the time to settle scores with a possible future Saudi king. In this regard, Omar Abdul Aziz, a prominent Saudi dissident, compared the trial of those responsible for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia to a "joke". He stressed that the journalist's problem was not only with the man and his family, but also with the behavior of MBS, and that his exclusion from sanctions meant that justice had not yet been served.

Saudi Arabia, quite naturally, officially rejected what it called "a negative, false and unacceptable assessment in the report pertaining to the kingdom's leadership," according to a Foreign Ministry statement. The Ministry added that the perpetrators of the "heinous crime" had been tried in Saudi courts and that "justice has been served." Commentators close to the government took to social media to defend the crown prince. Ali Shihabi, former head of the Arabia Foundation in Washington, said there is nothing in the report that hasn't been said before, and "absolutely no smoking gun." "It's surprising that all this ruckus has been raised about this document.... This thin 'report' is actually proof that no hard evidence against MBS exists," Shihabi wrote on Twitter. "The nation is strengthened," the conservative and semi-official newspaper Okaz opined on the front page of its issue with a large photo of the smiling Crown Prince. "The Biden administration will soon realize that the region's complex problems will find no solution except through a new and exclusive agreement with its partners in the region, which includes holding Tehran accountable," Okaz wrote.

The general impression when reading the Saudi newspapers is that they are all as one in defense of the crown prince and the sovereignty of the kingdom. "America has no right to intimidate a strategic regional ally, and it is not in its interest to allow internal disagreements to harm its regional interests and those of its partners," Khaled al-Malik wrote in the local Al-Jazeera newspaper. Expressing the official view, he noted that Saudi Arabia, which relied on the United States for its defense, including during the first Gulf War and after attacks on its oil infrastructure in 2019, could turn to China and Russia for weapons. "But the kingdom prefers America because of its historical and strategic ties and shared goals," he said, referring to Iran. Abdullah al-Otaibi, writing in the London-based newspaper Asharq al-Awsat, said the kingdom, Washington's oldest Arab ally, "is not a banana republic to be shaken by threats". We want to strengthen deep-rooted ties (with the United States), but not at the expense of our sovereignty. Our judicial system and our decisions are the red line, Fahim al-Hamid wrote in the newspaper Okaz. Since the US report was published, many Saudis have flooded Twitter with the hashtag "We are all Mohammed bin Salman."
If we analyze this veritable information storm, it becomes quite obvious that the whole essence of Joe Biden's "new policy" with regard to Saudi Arabia is even greater political, economic and military subordination of the kingdom to Washington's plans. And, evidently, this is why we can see more than once this kind of feigned "disagreement" between the two states.

Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.