

Biden Administration Sticks to 'Vague' Wording on Saudi Ties After Immunity Decision

US will continue to review its relationship with Saudi Arabia despite the administration saying the crown prince has immunity from Khashoggi lawsuit

By [Middle East Eye](#)

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The US is continuing to review its relationship with Saudi Arabia despite a Biden administration decision that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman should be provided immunity from a lawsuit over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The opinion that we provided does not speak in any way to the merits of the case nor the current status of the bilateral relationship."

"Our review of that relationship is ongoing," insisted Blinken, who arrived in Doha on Monday, a day after the crown prince was at the football World Cup opening ceremony.

"The Biden administration has always claimed they are re-evaluating their relationship with Saudi, but time and again, it seems to be promises and gestures more than a real fundamental shift of policy," Aziz Alghashian, a Riyadh-based researcher of Saudi foreign policy, told Middle East Eye.

The US said last month that it would reassess its relationship with Saudi Arabia after Riyadh backed an oil production cut at Opec+ that was seen as a snub to the US amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine and heightened energy prices.

The move was particularly embarrassing for Biden, who defended his visit to the kingdom in July as necessary to shore up US energy security.

"We've seen mostly gestures from the White House that signal how the relationship with Saudi Arabia has become less friendly. But beyond such gestures and symbolic moves, I don't think we can necessarily expect much in terms of 'consequences' for Riyadh," Giorgio Cafiero, the CEO and founder of Gulf State Analytics, told MEE.

Downgrade unlikely

As a candidate, Biden pledged to make Saudi Arabia “a pariah” over the murder of Middle East Eye and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, which the CIA said was sanctioned by Mohammed bin Salman.

Some Democratic lawmakers said the US should pursue measures against Saudi Arabia following the Opec+ move. Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, who chairs the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called for the US to freeze some arms sales to the kingdom – though that rhetoric has died down recently.

But the Biden administration is unlikely to make any of those moves as it looks to preserve the relationship in the context of a growing rivalry with China and Russia’s continued outreach to Riyadh, said Cafiero, from Gulf State Analytics.

“Any major moves on the administration’s part to downgrade relations or punish Riyadh would likely only push the Saudis even closer to Moscow and Beijing,” he added.

In addition, both Riyadh and Washington continue to share common concerns about security in the region, as tensions with Iran escalate.

“Shared interests continue keeping the US and Saudi Arabia close despite the shouting and angry sentiments between officials in Washington and Riyadh,” Cafiero said.

Keeping it vague

Democracy for the Arab World Now (Dawn), the US-based advocacy group founded by Khashoggi, and his fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, are plaintiffs in a lawsuit seeking justice for Khashoggi’s killing.

This month, the Biden administration said that Mohammed bin Salman should have immunity in the lawsuit, as head of state. The crown prince’s elevation to prime minister in September was [seen by critics](#) as an attempt to protect him from litigation.

Blinken added that there were “no plans” for the crown prince to visit Washington while it reviews relations with the Gulf state.

“With regard to MBS, there are no plans for him to travel to Washington,” Blinken said.

Like other Gulf leaders, the crown prince has been courted by western powers as the war in Ukraine revives concerns about energy security.

Mohammed bin Salman travelled to Europe this summer, and despite the rupture over Opec+, western executives have flocked to the oil-rich kingdom to get a slice of its booming economy. The World Bank predicts Saudi Arabia will have the fastest-growing economy in the G-20 this year.

Blinken reaffirmed the administration’s case for granting immunity.

Blinken told a press conference the US administration had followed “longstanding legal practice” that a head of state or government, or foreign minister, was “entitled to

immunity”.

“This is a determination that we’ve made in dozens, hundreds of cases over the years. And in every case, we simply follow the law,” he said.

Alghashian said the Biden administration likely hopes to keep its pledge to reset the relationship vague, “to avoid being perceived as breaking promises towards/against Saudi”.

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