

Saudi Arabia Calls Out US Bluster

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Global Research, October 16, 2022

[Indian Punchline](#) 14 October 2022

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

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Saudi Arabia has politely but firmly rebutted the threats and calumnies levelled by the US political elites in the past week since the OPEC decided to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day. On Thursday, a Foreign Ministry official in Riyadh forcefully pushed back the allegation that the OPEC decision was at Saudi initiative and was politically motivated against the US, and, worse still, to help Russia.

The [Saudi official rejected](#) the US allegations as baseless, especially the imputation that Saudi Arabia is "aligning" with Russia in the context of the Ukraine situation. The official made three substantive points:

- The OPEC+ decision constitutes the unanimous opinion of the member states and it is preposterous to attribute it to Saudi Arabia.
- Purely economic considerations lie behind the decision, which takes into account the imperatives of maintaining balance of supply and demand in the oil market and limiting the volatility.
- Saudi Arabia has taken a principled stance on the Ukraine issue, as its votes supporting two UN resolutions testify.

The Saudi official, inter alia, made a startling disclosure that the Biden Administration had actually tried to get Riyadh to postpone the OPEC+ decision by a month. Presumably, the [rage in Washington](#) today is not so much about the oil prices as the panic that the OPEC decision casts on the US diplomacy and foreign policy in general — and, especially, on President Biden personally — in a poor light as ineffectual and illogical, as the Republicans are highlighting.

Conceivably, the one-month delay that was sought was intended to overlap the forthcoming midterms in the US on November 8. Unsurprisingly, the Saudis didn't oblige the White House and it now becomes an unforgivable slight on the US' sense of entitlement and Biden's vanity.

Suffice it to say, the Democrats and the Biden Administration have worked themselves into

a frenzy because of their fear that the price of gas can become a combustible issue that may spell doom at the midterms. Some Democrats have gone to the absurd extent of suspecting that the Saudis are deliberately interfering in the US politics to help the Republicans' electoral prospects.

The Saudi statement has pointedly rejected "any dictates, actions, or efforts to distort its (Saudi) noble objectives to protect the global economy from oil market volatility." It is a mild warning that any anti-Saudi moves will meet with resistance and will have repercussions.

The Saudi statements came within hours of an [interview by Biden](#) with the CNN on Thursday, where he warned that "There's going to be some consequences for what they've (Saudis) done, with Russia. I'm not going to get into what I'd consider and what I have in mind. But there will be — there will be consequences."

Later, John Kirby, a White House National Security Council spokesman, said Biden believes "it's time to take another look at this relationship and make sure that it's serving our national security interests."

Biden himself was speaking a day after the influential Democratic senator from New Jersey Bob Menendez threatened to block cooperation with Saudi Arabia. He excoriated Saudi Arabia, accusing it of helping "underwrite Putin's war through the OPEC+ cartel." Menendez ripped into the kingdom, and went on to say that the US must "immediately freeze all aspects of our cooperation with Saudi Arabia, including any arms sales and security cooperation beyond what is absolutely necessary to defend US personnel and interests."

In good measure, Menendez added an ultimatum that he would not "green-light any cooperation with Riyadh until the Kingdom reassesses its position with respect to the war in Ukraine. Enough is enough."

Quite obviously, the White House's strategy is to obfuscate the matter by making the OPEC+ decision a geopolitical challenge to the US strategies concerning Ukraine and Russia rather than as a historic rebuff to Biden's clumsy personal diplomacy — which it is — to try to get Saudi Arabia on board his fanciful project to bring down the oil prices so that Russia's income from oil exports will be severely curtailed.

The fact of the matter is that the OPEC decision virtually derails the Biden Administration's pet project to impose a price cap on Russia's oil exports. Simply put, that hare-brained project, conceived by the US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, flounders if oil prices remain high.

Interestingly, the [G7 statement last week](#) on Ukraine and Russia did not make any references to the price cap project. On the other hand, high oil prices will further aggravate the economic crisis in Europe even as the EU is moving towards terminating all oil imports from Russia by December 5. Meanwhile, the Biden Administration is acutely conscious that the Europeans — Germany and France included — are increasingly murmuring their discontent that the Americans played them and are selling gas at vastly higher prices in the European energy market.

When an influential senator like Menendez throws down the gauntlet to Riyadh, it can be taken as signalling that some retaliatory action against Saudi Arabia is in the cards. Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut and Rep. Ro Khanna of California have

introduced legislation that would immediately pause all US arms sales to Saudi Arabia for one year as well as halt sales of spare and repair parts, support services and logistical support.

But appearances can be deceptive. The vehemence of the rage and rave have a contrived look, a touch of bluster. Significantly, in his CNN interview, Biden stopped short of endorsing the Democratic lawmakers' call to halt weapons. Biden merely said he would look to consult with Congress on the way forward.

Whereas, Menendez has promised to use his position as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to block any future arms sales to the Saudis. Quite obviously, the anger with Saudi Arabia has become far more palpable on Capitol Hill, but will it translate into action?

The big question is how much of this bluster is with an eye on the mid-terms in November. The White House national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told reporters that Biden was also looking at a possible halt in arms sales as part of a broader re-evaluation of the US relationship with Saudi Arabia, but that no move was imminent.

Indeed, any attempt to rebalance the relations with Saudi Arabia will have ripple effects at a time when the contours of an emerging alliance between Saudi Arabia and Russia are becoming apparent, the Iran question remains unresolved and high oil prices upset the US consumer and deepen the crisis in Europe — and, of course, so long as petrodollar remains a key pillar of the western banking system. Besides, as things stand, US influence in the West Asia is today a pale shadow of what it used to be, and alienating Saudi Arabia to a point of no return will be an exceedingly foolish thing to do.

Above all, will the military-industrial complex in the US countenance a US-Saudi break-up? Saudi Arabia is the proverbial goose that lays golden eggs. It is a terrific paymaster for the American arms industry. Geopolitical analysts often call it the US' ATM. Equally, the bottom line is that the Democrats wouldn't even be able to garner enough Republican support to pass legislation once Congress is back in session next month.

The Saudi statement concludes with a word of advice for American diplomacy in these extraordinary times of multipolarity: "Resolving economic challenges requires the establishment of a non-politicised constructive dialogue, and to wisely and rationally consider what serves the **interests of all countries**." (Emphasis added.) It ended recalling that "the solid pillars upon which the Saudi-US relationship had stood over the past eight decades" include mutual respect and common interests, amongst other things.

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