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Tensions Between US and Saudi Arabia on the Rise

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Joe Biden's ideological commitment to Western liberal values promised to recover old US alliances, which were threatened by Trump's nationalism – as in the European case. However, the rigid defense of these same values can apparently also hinder important points of American foreign policy, destroying other historic alliances, mainly in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, a historical representative of Western interests in the Middle East, remains uncertain about the future of its relations with the US, considering the rise of Biden. So far, Saudi officials have received no contact from the new American president. Not only that: Washington has already stated that it will not make a call to Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and that any matter needing dialogue will be dealt directly with King Salman.

For the Saudis, Biden's attitude is a real affront and threatens the future of a historic friendship between these two countries. For the ideological wing of the American government, however, Biden's attitude is fair and necessary, considering that America, as a "protector of democracy", cannot maintain close ties with "human rights violating" nations.

Further deepening the rupture of its ties with the Kingdom, Washington completely changed its attitude towards one of the main enemies of the Saudis, the Houthis. The American government recently revised its stance on Houthis and stopped considering them a terrorist organization. The case surprised everyone, including the Houthis and other enemies of the US, who did not expect such a u-turn from the US. However, far from representing a possible solution to the conflict in Yemen, the American decision only tends to cause more problems.

But not all members of the American political elite are satisfied with this situation. The defense and intelligence sectors are concerned about Biden's attitude and are trying to convince the president of the strategic importance of maintaining friendly relations with the Saudi kingdom in order to guarantee American positions in the Middle East. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke on the phone with the Saudi prince, trying to ease tensions and establish diplomacy in order to ensure the mutual interests of the two countries. Obviously, the ideological wing of the government did not like the attitude, and this may generate internal strain in Washington.

It is important to emphasize how, with Donald Trump, Saudi Arabia was safer, despite a much less interventionist policy than the one planned and promised by Biden. The new president has an aggressive rhetoric towards the Middle East and promises to increase the

number of military personnel in the region, but he is not concerned with the preservation of the old alliances and does not hesitate to create new enemies. Biden disrupted almost all of the deals Trump had previously had with Riyadh, which mainly included the sale of advanced military technology to the security forces. For example, the US government recently announced the cancellation of the sale of 7,500 guided bombs to Saudi Arabia, ending an estimated 500 million dollars deal.

Faced with the possibility of becoming a new target of American sanctions and losing the military protection guaranteed by Washington in recent decades, what remains for the Saudis is to seek new allies. In terms of arms supply and military trade, alternative options to the US abound. Russia and China, for example, will certainly be willing to negotiate fair prices as long as elementary conditions of diplomacy are preserved. Another option is to strengthen ties within the Middle East itself: considering the recent rapprochement between Arabs and Israelis, the Kingdom may tighten negotiations with Israel and seek the supply of military equipment as a condition for maintaining a peace agreement between both countries – and then opposition to Iran and the Houthis would be strengthened, with Saudis and Israelis as allies.

Still, it is necessary to consider that there is an old Gulf Cooperation Council's project for the countries of the bloc to create a local military alliance, focused on the objective of protecting themselves from possible attacks by their regional enemies. The project is currently delayed, but American attitudes can lead to a recovery of this idea. If this happens, we will have a curious scenario, where the Arabian Gulf will assume a role of increasing autonomy in relation to Washington and will assert itself on the international stage as an independent economic and military bloc. Biden will certainly try to prevent this with sanctions and blockades, but at the same time, by sanctioning these nations, Washington will be encouraging them to do even more negotiations with other powers and become less and less dependent on the West.

As we can see, Biden's ideological commitment is causing a series of structural changes in American politics, and that can cause different problems. The reason Biden is revising his position in relation to the Saudis is the endless list of denunciations and accusations of human rights violations in the Arab country. Certainly, a considerable part of these accusations is true, but breaking historical ties in the name of humanitarian causes seems to be an irresponsible step. After all, what will Biden do with the structural violation of human rights within the American legal system, which each year incarcerates suspected terrorists without the right to defense? If the new president really wants to be such a strong advocate for these agendas, he will have to submit his own country to international trial.

In any case, this shows how the president's own ideological crusade, in practice, drives a process of multipolarisation by breaking historical ties and forging new alliances.

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