

Time for Arabs to Come Together and Rethink Strategic Alliances

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US national security adviser Jake Sullivan's discussions in Riyadh with Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman coincided with the Arab League foreign ministers' decision to end the 12-year suspension of Syria from the League. Since Syria's return was mooted many months ago, US President Joe Biden and senior officials had repeatedly expressed rejection. Therefore, the move amounted to a slap in the face for his administration by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, which sought to achieve this objective before the Arab summit in Riyadh on May 19.

While in Riyadh, Sullivan was meant to discuss Syrian normalisation along with peacemaking in Yemen and the conflict in Sudan. It seems Syria did not receive much attention. The White House brief issued on the talks mentioned the Saudi evacuation of US citizens from Sudan, the Yemen truce and the administration's efforts to link Gulf Cooperation Council member states with India through a massive infrastructure project involving shipping and development of a network to promote trade between India and the Gulf. This effort is, of course, meant to challenge China's well-established "Road and Belt" project designed to connect the countries which had been joined by the ancient "Silk Road" trade routes which lasted for 1,500 years and stretched from China to the Mediterranean and delivered goods, travellers, advanced eastern culture, technologies and ideas to Western Europe.

Before flying to Saudi Arabia, Sullivan paid obeisance to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the most powerful Israeli lobby organisation in the US, by delivering a major foreign policy speech to AIPAC'S research arm, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. In this address, Sullivan spoke of Biden's efforts to seize "this moment to help set the rules, shape the strategic environment and advance the values and norms that will define the world we want to live in".

He said that the administration intends to "engage from a position of strength" and that

Biden's commitment to the Middle East region is unshakable" despite pressures and violence. He bragged about US achievements, including the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border demarcation, killing "terrorists", brokering reconciliation between estranged regional powers, and promoting Israel's regional integration. Of course, he spoke of "US values" and the obligations of countries to abide by the UN Charter.

Sullivan's words were bitterly ironic as the US has only once in this region operated in line with "values" since Washington shelved the 1919 report by the King-Crane commission which urged world powers to listen to the demands of Arab citizens and grant them independence in territories formerly ruled by the collapsed Ottoman empire. Instead, the US did nothing when France and Britain divided the Arab land into Syria, Lebanon, Jordan Iraq and Palestine. And, when the British handed Palestine over to Zionist colonists who occupied that country by war in 1948 and 1967. Israel has cut the land bridge between Egypt and the Levant and waged near constant warfare against the Arabs without US hinderance or objection.

The one time when the US displayed respect for values and the UN Charter was in 1956 when then President Dwight Eisenhower ordered Israel to withdraw from Egypt's Sinai following the tripartite Israeli, British and French attack on Egypt.

Sullivan was accompanied during this visit to Riyadh by White House Regional Coordinator Brett McGurk and Energy Adviser Amos Hochstein (a dual US- Israeli citizen,) who promptly travelled to Israel to brief Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and other Israeli officials, demonstrating the Biden administration's total commitment to Israel and disrespect for confidential briefings by the Saudis.

Therefore, it is about time for the Arabs to come together and rethink their strategic alliances with the aim of securing their interests rather than giving priority to the interests of Washington. These always coincide with Israel's interests due to total bipartisan backing from US politicians whether in Congress or the White House.

Before becoming president, Biden pledged to reverse destructive policies carried out by the administration of Donald Trump. Biden promised to re-enter the 2015 agreement limiting Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for lifting sanctions from which Trump withdrew. Biden said he would restore US relations with the Palestinians and reopen the Palestinian mission in Washington and the US consulate in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem. He has reneged on all these pledges and has knuckled under to the Israeli diktat. In addition, he has pivoted East with the aim of countering China's growing influence while ignoring strategic West Asia. Sullivan's visit to Riyadh was meant to show that Biden remains interested in this region.

While maintaining loose ties to the US, leading Arab states have made the switch from US global hegemony to multi-polarity by courting Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (which form the BRICS grouping) and have become associated with the China-sponsored Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Arab countries which have become dialogue partners to the SCO are Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Washington's oldest regional ally, Saudi Arabia has also expanded the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) by adding the US-rival Russia as a chief actor on the organised energy front (OPEC+). Last fall, OPEC+ cut oil exports in defiance of Biden's pleas to increase supplies to lower US petrol prices to boost Biden's standing ahead of that

country's mid-term Congressional election. This amounted to the first slap in the face for Biden, who promptly vowed to make Riyadh pay but soon changed his mind and tried to court the Saudis in order to warm relations with them.

This effort brought Sullivan's visit, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to take the road to Riyadh next month after the Arabs have welcomed Syria's return to the Arab fold despite Biden's strong objections. Leading Arab governments are prepared to work with the US on issues where it is Arab interests to do so, they have shown that they will give their national and, perhaps even, Arab interests priority. China, Russia and Third World countries can provide balance and freedom to choose.

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