

US foreign policy

Saudi Arabia tests US ties with Opec+ output cut

Biden to re-evaluate relationship after Riyadh gambled on antagonising western ally in order to pursue its own agenda



US president Joe Biden, centre left, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, centre right, at a security and development summit in Jeddah in July © Mandel Ngan/Pool/AFP/Getty Images

Samer Al-Atrush and **Simeon Kerr** in Dubai, **Andrew England** in London and **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington YESTERDAY

As US politicians lined up to lambast Saudi Arabia after the Opec+ alliance slashed its oil production targets last month, the kingdom put forward one of its most seasoned diplomats to deliver a message on American television channels: this is not about you.

“The idea that Saudi Arabia would do this to harm the US or to be in any way politically involved is absolutely not correct at all,” Adel al-Jubeir, minister of state for foreign affairs and a former ambassador to the US, told Fox News at the weekend.

The message from Riyadh was that it had acted on the basis of market conditions and in its own interests as it sought to preserve oil prices to fund massive state spending plans.

But its words fell on deaf ears as Democrats raged against the kingdom, a traditional US ally, for ignoring [Washington’s pleas not to cut output](#).

President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that “there will be consequences” for Saudi Arabia, without elaborating. He was speaking after John Kirby, National Security Council spokesperson, said the administration was [re-evaluating Washington’s relationship](#) with Riyadh in “light of the Opec decision”. Kirby told CNN that Biden was willing to work with Congress on punitive steps against Saudi Arabia.

The production cuts highlighted how under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom is increasingly willing to pursue its own agenda even if it risks upsetting its partners. But it was also a gamble as the decision by [Opec+](#), which includes Russia, to cut output targets by 2mn barrels a day has further damaged Saudi Arabia's image in the US.

“They were trying to suggest very directly that the relationship between Washington and Riyadh is no longer a vertical one and, for both sides, mutual interests need to be taken into account,” said Sanam Vakil, a Gulf expert at Chatham House. “Through this kind of assertive behaviour they are saying if you want us on side, our relationship needs to be nurtured.”

But in Washington, the move was considered a snub of Biden ahead of midterm elections and amid high global energy inflation. The deal also underlined US concerns about Riyadh's relationship with Moscow as Vladimir Putin has stepped up his war against Ukraine.

On Monday, Bob Menendez, Democratic chair of the Senate foreign relations committee, called on the administration to “immediately freeze all aspects of our co-operation with Saudi Arabia, including any arms sales and security co-operation”.

“I will not greenlight any co-operation with Riyadh until the kingdom reassesses its position with respect to the war in Ukraine,” he said. “Enough is enough.”

The decision also unsettled a Saudi ally closer to home. Riyadh insisted all 23 Opec+ members were supportive of the cut, but the United Arab Emirates, its closest Arab partner, as well as Iraq, had expressed misgivings, according to several people briefed on the discussions.

When the UAE's concerns failed to gain traction, it suggested a delay but to no avail, the people said. The UAE's energy minister and his Iraqi counterpart later agreed to go along with the cut and defended it after the meeting.

As with Saudi Arabia, the UAE has [sought to pursue a neutral stance](#) on Russia's war in Ukraine. Both Gulf states are dependent on US arms and weapons systems and have been pushing for greater security commitments from Washington.

But the contrasting narratives highlighted strains in a decades-old relationship between Riyadh and Washington. Ties have historically centred on personal relations between the president and the king, but today it is blighted by mistrust, tensions and misunderstanding, analysts said.

Prince Mohammed, the country's de facto ruler, had good relations with former president Donald Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, both of whom stood by him after Saudi agents murdered Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

But the crown prince has virtually no relationship with Biden, who campaigned for office vowing to turn Saudi Arabia into a "pariah" over Khashoggi's murder, which Riyadh blamed on a rogue operation, and for other rights abuses.

His administration also froze sales of "offensive weapons" to Riyadh over its military intervention in Yemen, reinforcing the Saudi perception that the US was no longer a predictable partner.

"The personal touch is not there and they don't have enough understanding of each other's needs, political climate and culture on either side," Vakil said.

After a July meeting between Prince Mohammed and Biden, US officials were optimistic the kingdom was willing to increase oil production.

Saudi officials, however, have said Riyadh made no such promise. In August, as the US state department approved a \$3bn missile sale for the kingdom's Patriot air defence systems, Opec+ raised its output target by just 100,000 b/d, one of the smallest increases in its history. In September, the cartel started announcing cuts.

"What Saudi Arabia promised was to do its best to stop oil from going to \$200 and it did that by increasing production in the summer," said Ali Shihabi, a Saudi commentator close to the royal court. "The kingdom never committed to allow[ing] the price of oil to collapse."

Prior to the Opec+ meeting, US officials had proposed at least delaying the cuts until after the congressional election, Shihabi said, a suggestion Saudi Arabia rejected.

A US official said it was "categorically false" that the administration sought a delay in connection with the midterms, adding that Washington's concern was the impact on the global economy.

Saudi officials and commentators view the criticism of the output cut as a symptom of US domestic politics.

Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud said the US remained the kingdom's top security partner. "I think that when politicians in America assess the relationship in its entirety, they will recognise its importance and the benefits it brings and they will continue to co-operate with Saudi Arabia. We are keen on this co-

operation,” he told the Saudi-owned broadcaster Al-Arabiya on Tuesday night.

But Jon Alterman, the director of the Middle East programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Riyadh could expect increasing hostility from Congress.

“Whether it was or not, there was an odour that this smacked of payback for the comments that Biden made during the campaign and supposedly the lectures he delivered during his visit to the kingdom,” he said.

Alterman added: “That could get messy for the Saudis very quickly as they don’t have many friends in Congress.”

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