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New allegations against MbS go unchallenged by the west

Explosive new allegations about the Saudi crown prince have been met with the usual silence from western governments, who will turn a blind eye for the sake of normalization with Tel Aviv.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

Earlier this month, a flurry of headlines in the US and British media spotlighted astounding new allegations against Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS).

A former top Saudi intelligence official, Saad al-Jabri, accused MbS of forging his father King Salman's signature to deploy ground troops to Yemen in 2015, and accused him of conspiring to murder former King Abdullah to make way for his father's reign. These explosive claims were featured in the *BBC* documentary [The Kingdom: The World's Most Powerful Prince](#), prompting a renewed wave of scrutiny regarding MbS's controversial actions during his rise to power.

Major British tabloids and newspapers like [The Sun](#) and [The Times](#) quickly picked up the story, running headlines like "Saudi Prince Mohammed Bin Salman' FORGED his father's signature to launch Yemen invasion."

Renewed scrutiny of MbS met with western inaction

These pieces reignited debates around MbS's governance, his involvement in the Yemen war, the blockade of Qatar, the infamous Ritz-Carlton "[shakedown](#)" of Saudi billionaires and officials, and the 2017 saga in which Lebanese Prime Minister [Saad Hariri](#) was forced to resign on Saudi TV.

While the [Jamal Khashoggi murder](#) at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul nearly six years ago still lingers in the public memory, these fresh allegations have brought back into focus the contentious early years of the crown prince's ascent to power as the kingdom's de facto ruler.

Yet, experts speaking to *The Cradle* do not believe that these articles about Jabri's allegation are in any way part of a US and/or UK government-led information campaign designed to put the screws on MbS.

"I don't think the US government has any interest right now in putting pressure on MbS – certainly not ... in this manner right now, or in any other manner," Dr William Lawrence, a professor of political science and international affairs at American University's School of International Service, tells *The Cradle*, adding:

I do know that there are people in the US and Britain that continue to put pressure on MbS, going back to his rise to power and subsequent firings, and going back to the Khashoggi murder. Those people kind of come and go in the media, and I would just call this a coming in the media of that crowd. There are Americans and British people in the crowd, some of whom have connections to both governments. But there's no governmental effort going on here.

The same is true regarding the British government. At this point, analysts say that policymakers in London are not motivated to leverage pressure on MbS or Saudi Arabia as a country.

“The UK has no real issues with MbS’s Saudi Arabia beyond human rights issues – at the moment at least,” Dr Andreas Krieg, an associate professor at King’s College London, explains to *The Cradle*.

“The UK government has been fairly positive towards Saudi in terms of how they communicate, how they engage over trade and also security. The relationship between the UK and Riyadh has been a lot more constructive now over the last couple of years than it was six or seven years ago. So, there’s no reason for the UK to put pressure on MbS at this point,” he explained.

On the recent media blitz against MbS, Dr Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, says:

Journalists were reporting on an allegation made in a BBC documentary by [Jabri], which is why it was deemed to be newsworthy, given the nature of the allegation that was being made. The documentary itself featured a number of pro-regime voices and was balanced in its overall assessment of MbS.

Pragmatism over principle

The US and Saudi Arabia have long been at odds over a range of sensitive regional and international issues, including Ukraine, Gaza, Israeli normalization, Syria, and OPEC+. These disagreements have fueled some significant tension in Washington and Riyadh’s relationship. In essence, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated its determination to conduct a foreign policy that is increasingly autonomous from the US and much less western-centric in an increasingly multipolar world. And while US policymakers are frustrated over this, they lack the leverage to change Saudi behavior, especially given that they increasingly need Riyadh’s cooperation as West Asia’s conflicts escalate.

The Saudi response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine spoke volumes about Riyadh’s determination to chart its own course on the international stage and navigate multipolarity in manners that the kingdom’s leaders see as most beneficial to Saudi interests.

Not only did Saudi Arabia [avoid implementing](#) any of the west’s sanctions on Moscow, but it also maintained close coordination with Russia on energy policies via OPEC+ and even hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin on his first post-February 2022 trip to West Asia. Moreover, Saudi officials refrained from referring to a Russian “invasion” when discussing the conflict.

Despite these frictions, Washington is not airing its grievances publicly. While on the campaign trail in 2019, Joe Biden [vowed](#) to treat Saudi Arabia as a “pariah” in response to human rights concerns, his administration has since taken a more [pragmatic approach](#),

closely cooperating with the kingdom. In reality, the White House has not treated Saudi Arabia as anything close to a “pariah.”

The US sees Riyadh holding special cards and being uniquely qualified to help Washington advance its interests across many portfolios. Rather than putting pressure on the kingdom, Biden’s team has done much to accommodate Saudi interests. The recent decision to [resume](#) the sale of offensive weapons to Riyadh illustrates this point.

The limits of US influence

Despite the Biden administration’s efforts to expand the scope of the 2020 Abraham Accords, Riyadh has stood firmly in favor of its long-held position that Israeli normalization can only happen after (as opposed to before) the brutal and dehumanizing Israeli occupation of Palestinian land ends and a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders is established.

Although the Biden team has sought to bring other Arab states, including Libya, into the Abraham Accords, the White House has been most focused on Saudi Arabia normalizing with Israel – and Biden has long wanted this unrealized possibility to be a centerpiece of his foreign policy legacy. Mindful of Saudi Arabia’s leadership role in the Arab–Islamic world, vast energy resources, and geography, Riyadh formalizing relations with Tel Aviv would constitute a major victory for Washington from the standpoint of integrating Israel into the region.

At the end of the day, the White House sees Saudi Arabia as too important and influential a country for the US to ostracize.

Quickly shrugging off his election rhetoric against the Saudi crown prince, Biden made a controversial trip to Jeddah five months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and had his famous “[fist bump](#)” moment with MbS. As former US ambassador to Tunisia, Gordon Gray tells *The Cradle*:

President Biden’s meeting with MbS in Jeddah ... [in] July 2022 ...reflected his realization that the United States could no longer treat Saudi Arabia as a ‘pariah,’ as candidate Biden had proposed in November 2019, if it wanted to advance US security interests in the Middle East.

“The Biden team has clearly concluded that MbS’ human rights record is no longer a motivating concern, as evidenced by the decision to once again allow the sale of so-called offensive weapons to the Saudis,” Dr Annelle Sheline, a Research Fellow in the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, explains to *The Cradle*.

Pushing for normalization with Israel

The Biden administration will continue to value Saudi Arabia as a key player that Washington must work with, both when it comes to limiting the Gaza war's [spillover effects](#) throughout West Asia and containing the region's Resistance Axis, in addition to winding down the Sudanese conflict.

If the Israeli war on Gaza is over before Biden's term expires, his team will want to see Riyadh [normalize with Tel Aviv](#) - an obsession of this administration, the rest of Washington's policy establishment, and Israel.

Regardless of whether Vice President Kamala Harris or former President Donald Trump enters the Oval Office in early 2025, this US-led push to bring the kingdom into the Abraham Accords will remain a key part of Washington's West Asia foreign policy, even if such an outcome is highly unrealistic given Israel's refusal to make even minimal concessions to the Palestinians.

US officials are well aware that any government-led information campaign to humiliate MbS would be counterproductive from the standpoint of trying to bring Saudi Arabia into the Israeli normalization camp.

Meanwhile, the Jabri case continues to unfold in [Canada](#), where he has been living since the 2017 palace coup. When a former Saudi intelligence official like Jabri makes serious allegations against MbS, it is understandable why many journalists report on these claims. Jabri has his own motivations for ensuring that, even as MbS rises as a global statesman, the west does not forget certain aspects of his ascent to power. Journalists, activists, and concerned citizens in the west who oppose their governments' dealings with MbS and his welcome in their countries are eager to maintain pressure on the Saudi crown prince.

While western policymakers, particularly in the US and UK, display no overt intentions to pressure MbS at this time, last week's disparaging media headlines constituted a swat at a Saudi leader who holds the keys to numerous western interests in his hands.

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