



Riyadh Turns East

September 14, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

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It's official: Saudi Arabia has begun to seek other suitors.

Last month, in a move that passed largely unnoticed amid the unfolding debacle in Afghanistan, the House of Saud signed a new military cooperation agreement with Russia. The deal, inked on the sidelines of the International Military-Technical Forum near Moscow by Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman and his Russian counterpart, Alexander Fomin, is aimed at developing joint military coordination between the two countries.

While details of the agreement remain sparse, speculation abounds that it encompasses systems like unmanned aerial vehicles and military helicopters, which Riyadh needs to address its immediate security needs. On a broader level, however, the Saudi-Russian deal reflects a momentous strategic shift, as the kingdom adapts to the changes taking place in America's Mideast policy.

Since it took office some seven months ago, the Biden administration has upended practically every aspect of its predecessor's approach to the region, with the 76 year U.S.-Saudi relationship one of the principal casualties.

The decoupling has been rapid and dramatic. In February, the administration formally ended its support for the kingdom's long-running military campaign against the Houthis in neighboring Yemen. Some two weeks later, it rolled back the Iranian-backed militia's well-deserved designation as a global terrorist organization. And just days later, it authorized the release of an intelligence report pinning blame for the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (although subsequent sanctions against Saudi officials stopped short of targeting the kingdom's *de facto* ruler directly). The cumulative effect, as one prominent analyst put it, was an act of "diplomatic arson" in one of Washington's longest-running partnerships in the region.

If those machinations gave Riyadh serious pause, the administration's other regional maneuvers have given it still more. Take, for instance, Team Biden's tepid response to the "Abraham Accords," as the peace and normalization accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have come to be known. From the start of its tenure, the administration has been hesitant to recognize those agreements in any meaningful way—and quick to minimize them when it has had no choice but to do so. That has had a chilling effect on other potential entrants, including Saudi Arabia, which at the tail end of the Trump administration was widely considered likely to become the next nation to normalize ties with Israel. Simply put, President Joe Biden's lukewarm attitude toward Arab-Israeli reconciliation—and his apparent unwillingness to nurture any such rapprochement—has dramatically cooled Riyadh on the idea of taking such a significant (and for the Saudis, politically risky) step.

So, too, has the Biden administration's repeated efforts to engage the kingdom's main regional rival, Iran. From the start, the administration has abandoned its predecessor's policy of "maximum pressure" in favor of diplomatic concessions and cajoling intended to bring Tehran back to the nuclear negotiating table—albeit without much success so far. In the process, it has rolled back its enforcement of existing U.S. sanctions, disengaged from meaningful dialogue with Iranian opposition elements and turned a deaf ear to regional concerns regarding Iran's malign behavior in their neighborhood. The message has been unmistakable: America is determined to revive diplomacy with Iran, no matter the risk to its regional allies or regional alliances.

It's no wonder, then, that the Saudis have begun looking further afield.

To be sure, that process began even before the Biden administration's new, less conciliatory approach to the kingdom. In recent years, the House of Saud has courted massive Chinese foreign investment and made Beijing a key part of its "Vision 2030" reform and development plan. Yet, under previous presidents, those economic connections were balanced against a robust foreign and defense partnership with Washington—which, despite ongoing tensions over an array of issues, officials in Riyadh still saw as their dominant geopolitical alignment. If Riyadh's new military lash-up with Moscow is any indication, however, that may be beginning to change.

During his August jaunt to Moscow, Prince Khalid bin Salman also got the opportunity to meet with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who waxed optimistic about the prospects of the two countries erecting a strategic partnership across "the entire spectrum" of "mutual interest" issues. Given the regional priorities of the kingdom's current strategic partner, Shoigu might just get his wish.