

President Biden Explores a Groundbreaking Move in the Middle East

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President Biden is examining options for promoting a groundbreaking regional move in the Middle East, which will focus primarily on normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel in exchange for an Israeli commitment to take certain steps on the Palestinian issue and United States approval of a series of significant Saudi demands, including a defense pact, a civilian nuclear program, and advanced weapon systems. New in this dynamic is the apparent greater willingness of the administration to accommodate Saudi demands. The actual prospects for success are unclear, and President Biden is aware that the regional actors, especially Israel, will be required to take to take historic decisions.

In an interview with *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman in advance of the vote in Israel abolishing the reasonableness standard, President Biden clearly stated his objection to the judicial overhaul led by the Israeli government. A second part of the interview, published on July 27, 2023, after the Knesset vote, dealt with the administration's efforts to promote a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. At a campaign event held on July 28, Biden [referred](#) publicly to the initiative and said that "a rapprochement may be underway," but refrained from providing any further details.

According to Friedman, on July 27, Biden sent his National Security Advisor and the National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa to Saudi Arabia (for the second time within only a few months) to discuss the regional package. In exchange for their willingness to accept the deal, the parties reportedly would be required to take a series of steps,

whose implementation would pose the respective leaders with complex strategic and political challenges:

- Saudi Arabia is likely to demand a defense pact with the United States, similar to the US commitment to NATO member states, including an undertaking to defend the Kingdom, should it be attacked; almost unlimited advanced (conventional) weapons sales; and approval of a civilian Saudi nuclear program under an as yet unspecified form of US.
- Beyond normalization with Israel, the United States is likely to demand of Saudi Arabia that it end the war in Yemen, provide the Palestinian Authority with a generous aid package, and limit its developing relations with China.
- Israel will likely be required to avoid any measures that may jeopardize a future two-state solution with the Palestinians, and to that end, commit – indefinitely – to refrain from annexation of the West Bank, establishment of new settlements and legalization of illegal outposts; to transfer certain territories from Area C to Palestinian control; and overall, to take steps to strengthen the Palestinian Authority.
- The Palestinian Authority will likely be required to give its blessing to the overall deal in exchange for extensive Saudi aid and the said Israeli concessions.

Significance

Friedman's article does not supply any new information regarding the particulars of the package, long contemplated by Washington. Rather, its significance lies in its timing, chosen by the President, and the very US willingness to accelerate the move, demonstrated by the dispatch of the US advisors to Riyadh.

The administration's willingness to promote the package may be based on the assumption that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has declared that normalization with Saudi Arabia is one of his government's main goals, may consider the deal as a way out of the political morass in

Israel. In fact, the move by the administration may be a sort of “response” by the President to the failure of his efforts to persuade the Prime Minister to avoid passage of the law abolishing the reasonableness standard, in the absence of a broad political consensus. In light of the Saudi demands, it seems that the administration is aware of the need to pay a high price for the normalization, and is increasingly willing to do so.

President Biden seeks to confront the regional actors with the need to take historic decisions. The administration is starting with Saudi Arabia, which would likely have to demonstrate its willingness to make do with less than 100 percent of its demands (albeit not much less). The US security establishment, which currently faces major global challenges, including in the Asia-Pacific arena and vis-à-vis Russia in Ukraine, would be hard pressed to provide military guarantees to any country, let alone Saudi Arabia, with its long borders and numerous threats. (Defense treaties were last signed by the US with Japan in 1960, and before that, to a non-democratic country, as South Korea still was in 1953).

Riyadh’s demand that the United States accept a Saudi civilian nuclear program, which would include independent enrichment capabilities, without signing a special agreement to prevent the risk of proliferation (the “1,2,3 gold standard”), poses considerable difficulties to the administration, and certainly Israel. Should the US agree to this demand, it is most likely that the Saudis would have to agree to stringent US supervision. One of the options proposed in the past was the establishment of a US-Saudi nuclear corporation, a so-called “nuclear Aramco,” which would enable the United States to oversee the establishment and operation of the uranium enrichment program. A civilian nuclear program in Saudi Arabia, including uranium enrichment, entails a real danger, since other countries in the Middle East might raise similar demands, increasing the risk of nuclear proliferation in the region. The UAE, for example, has given up uranium enrichment within its boundaries in exchange for assistance in the establishment of its nuclear program. One cannot rule out the possibility that it would demand a re-negotiation of the agreement or seek compensation from the United States.

The Saudi demand for the most advanced weapons likewise raises serious concerns in the United States over a regional conventional arms race that would involve Egypt, the UAE, and even Israel. In Israel's case, the United States would have trouble fulfilling its contractual obligation to preserve the country's quality military edge, for instance, if F-35 fighter jets (which Riyadh has been interested in for quite some time) were sold to Saudi Arabia. There are additional concerns regarding the future of these weapons, should Saudi Arabia undergo severe internal turmoil. The UAE, which until now has not received the F-35 jets that it claims were promised to it by the United States, might consider their delivery to Saudi Arabia as a basis for renewing its claim or as a blow to its stature.

A positive US response to the Saudi demand for a defense pact or an equivalent guarantee is expected to give rise to similar demands by other countries in the region, including Israel, and the administration's consent to such demands would contribute to the establishment of the regional security architecture it has long sought. Together, the above steps are aimed at considerably increasing the pressure on Iran and forcing it to exercise restraint in the negotiations on the nuclear issue, as well as making clear to Iran, Russia, and China that the United States remains the leading superpower in the Middle East.

The strategic aspects are joined by US internal normative and political considerations. The Democratic Party, as well as the President himself, has a strong aversion to theocratic Saudi Arabia in general, and its *de facto* ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in particular. During the last presidential campaign, the President even referred to Saudi Arabia as a pariah state and has long avoided contact with bin Salman. Even if the President's attitude has evolved due to increasing appreciation of Saudi Arabia's ongoing strategic importance, mainly due to the energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine, and appreciation of the far-reaching domestic reforms implemented by bin Salman, the administration might find it difficult to overcome objections in Congress to the Saudi demands. The key to overcoming this potential obstacle may be Israel's consent to

take practical steps on the Palestinian issue, which would meet the demands of the administration and many Democrat legislators, who seek to stop Israeli settlement expansion and de facto annexation of the West Bank and to preserve the prospect of a future two-state solution.

Most of the US demands to promote normalization are aimed at Israel. Any progress to this end is expected to meet with objection by the Prime Minister's coalition partners, and perhaps lead to the fall of his government. The administration may even be seeking to realize one of the following two options: the establishment of a new, more moderate, coalition government in Israel, or new elections to the Knesset, which in effect would constitute a referendum on the future of the West Bank. From the administration's perspective, the normalization initiative might be sufficiently attractive for Netanyahu to prompt him to adopt it despite the difficulties. It would afford him the opportunity to go down in history as a leader of a groundbreaking regional transformation; the possibility to extract himself from the judicial overhaul morass; and divert public attention from his personal legal affairs.

As with the Abraham Accords, the Palestinians remain bystanders, but may nonetheless enjoy significant benefits should the move come to fruition, namely, a halt to the annexation process in the West Bank, as well as considerable financial aid. The main loser in such a scenario would be Iran. The US administration also regards the move as a way of minimizing the possibility of an Israeli military action against Iran's nuclear program and easing the tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria, and between Israel and Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Partial normalization between Jerusalem and Riyadh might be possible even without a full Israeli-Palestinian agreement, but with the Saudis seeking the main rewards for normalization with Israel from the United States, they still require some recompense from Israel in the Palestinian context, which they could showcase as their contribution to the two-state solution. However, this goal may be hard to achieve, since the policy of the current Israeli government in the Palestinian context limits the ability to create favorable conditions for Israeli-Saudi progress.

Finally, a US push for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia would not be free of President Biden's own calculations, considering the upcoming electoral campaign in 2024 and his ambition to gain a considerable foreign policy achievement. At the same time, what may make this initiative viable is that it appears to stem from the President's deep personal commitment to his view of Israel as a democratic and Jewish state, and his wish to "save Israel from itself" and strengthen its security and position in the intra-Israeli, Palestinian, and regional contexts.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen