

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a global superpower, all US defense treaties are fundamentally asymmetrical in their advantages for the two sides and a treaty with Israel would be no different. Nevertheless, the US, too, stands to gain important benefits from a treaty with Israel. This would be especially true if tied to the emergence of a broader regional architecture, with Saudi Arabia at the center, and even more so if linked to progress on the Palestinian issue.

CENTCOM will presumably continue to be the focus of efforts to build a new regional security architecture in the Middle East. Cooperation between Israel and other CENTCOM states has deepened significantly since its inclusion in the regional command in 2021 and is likely to further do so. As seen by the response to the Iranian attack in April, a highly effective regional air defense system has already begun to emerge, intelligence sharing has increased and even deeper strategic cooperation is likely in the future. Together with deepening economic ties between Israel and other CENTCOM states, the regional security architecture might truly transform the Middle Eastern landscape and constitute an effective response to Iranian ambitions.

Israel has major strategic interests in normalization with the Saudis, a bilateral defense treaty with the US, and establishment of the regional security architecture. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, an historic transformation of the Middle Eastern landscape such as this, might constitute a means of restoring his greatly diminished political prospects. However, even just talk of a cessation of warfare in Gaza, in Israel's highly febrile political environment today, or of some vague path towards a Palestinian state, will lead to the collapse of his coalition and realization of precisely his greatest fears.

Both for the substantive reasons elucidated above and to strengthen Netanyahu's room for political maneuver, the US should now *publicly* propose a defense treaty, along with normalization with the Saudis and others, on the condition that he agrees to substantive progress on the Palestinian issue.

For Netanyahu, a defense treaty and normalization would constitute such a dramatic “win,” that he might be tempted to agree and risk early elections. The alternative, to stay the course with a narrow ultra-right coalition, would postpone the day of reckoning, but probably not for long. At a minimum, rejection of an American proposal such as this would further demonstrate to the Israeli public the primacy that Netanyahu accords to his own political and legal interests and further paint him into an electoral corner. Early elections and the emergence of a new and presumably far more moderate Israeli government, would serve American interests.

Should a full bilateral defense treaty between the US and Israel prove beyond reach at this time, the above-mentioned idea of enhanced or additional MoUs would constitute a partial alternative. A related option, mooted in the past, would be a “super MoU,” that would combine and supplant all existing ones and add desired new areas of cooperation. To ensure that it could not be changed or revoked in the future by presidential decision alone, the “super MoU” might be presented to both houses of Congress for approval, but only by the simple majority required, rather than the two-thirds needed for a formal treaty approved by the Senate. It is not entirely clear, however, that the simple majority would, in fact, be that much easier to achieve. More importantly, there may now be a unique opportunity to fully enshrine the bilateral US-Israel “special relationship” in a formal defense treaty, the preeminent strategic instrument.