

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly a year, a US-Saudi-Israeli grand bargain has been under discussion. The Saudis are to normalize relations with Israel, in exchange both for an Israeli commitment to go forward on the Palestinian issue and mostly for incentives from the US; a bilateral defense treaty, recognition of their civil nuclear program and essentially unrestricted access to American weaponry. In the early fall of 2023 President Biden was reportedly also considering a defense treaty with Israel.

The US and Saudi Arabia have reportedly achieved considerable progress towards completion of the deal. The US wishes to forge a new post-war Mideast security architecture, while the Saudis now want more tangible progress with the Palestinians. The renewed prospects of a US-Saudi defense treaty, once again raise the logic of a comparable agreement with Israel. Moreover, the US-Saudi package is unlikely to gain Congressional approval without strong Israeli support.

Prime Minister Ben-Gurion sought a US defense treaty as early as the 1950s, as a means of augmenting Israel's security. Premiers Rabin and Barak considered a defense treaty in the 1990s and 2000s, to offset the military risks stemming from the dramatic peace proposals they had made to the Palestinians and Syrians, and to assuage the deep and even existential fears these concessions engendered among Israel's public. Premier Netanyahu briefly toyed with the idea, primarily as an election ploy. Counterintuitively, perhaps, Israel's defense establishment has long opposed a formal defense treaty.

Until now, Clinton was the only president to give serious, if reluctant, consideration to a defense treaty, as the price of Rabin's and Barak's peace proposals. Indeed, the last time the US signed a formal defense treaty with any nation – the ultimate American security commitment – was in 1960. The different treaties all vary significantly in content and actual American security commitment (Appendix 1). By far the strongest commitment is NATO.

The inconclusive nature of the war in Gaza, ongoing conflict with Hezbollah and growing strength of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” (Hezbollah, Hamas and allied militias), reflect a significant change for the worse in Israel’s strategic circumstances. Iran, a regional superpower, is the first adversary Israel has ever faced that may be too big, distant, carefully calculating and powerful, to be defeated. Indeed, Iran has successfully surrounded Israel with a multi-front “ring of fire”: Hezbollah’s mammoth arsenal; Iranian forces, Hezbollah and other militias in Syria; Iraqi militias; the Houthis in Yemen; Hamas, badly mauled, but still deadly; and, of course, Iran itself.

Iran, moreover, appears to believe that the “Axis of Resistance” has successfully stymied Israel’s heretofore clear conventional military superiority and even overcome it. Concomitantly, Iran has effectively established itself as a threshold nuclear state.

The danger of Iran and its allies escalating the war in Gaza into a regional one, necessitated American strategic support for Israel even in a “limited” conflict with Hamas. To deter Iran and Hezbollah, the US deployed a major military force to the region and provided Israel with emergency weapons supply. When US and Israeli deterrence later failed and Iran launched a massive missile and drone attack against Israel (April 13), a US-led international coalition decisively defeated it.

All US defense treaties are fundamentally asymmetrical in their advantages for the sides and a treaty with Israel would be no different. Nevertheless, the US, too, stands to gain important benefits. The following paper assesses the primary advantages and disadvantages of a bilateral defense treaty from both the Israeli and American perspectives, at this time and in general.

Primary advantages of a defense treaty for both Israel and the US:

- The ultimate victory in Gaza would be the emergence of the new US-led regional security architecture against the “Axis of Resistance”. Derailing

this architecture was one of the reasons Hamas launched the war, with Iran's backing.

- Israel is deeply interested in normalization with the Saudis and the new security architecture. Incentives of this magnitude, coupled with a defense treaty with the US, might be sufficient to affect the prime minister's electoral calculus.
- Formal agreements, e.g. treaties, provide overall guidance for the formulation and implementation of policy, facilitating inter-agency coordination and bilateral cooperation.

Primary advantages of a defense treaty for Israel:

- Open new areas of cooperation and even place Israel on a par with the closest US allies.
- Help ensure that future administrations and Congresses remain committed to Israel's security and the long-term vitality of Israel's relationship with American Jews.
- Strengthen Israel's overall strategic posture and deterrence. No US ally's existence has been threatened following a defense treaty.
- Israel may need US support in a future strategic surprise, multi-front war and especially nuclear scenarios.
- Strengthen Israel's fundamental sense of security, thereby increasing its self-confidence to make critical decisions, primarily on the Iranian nuclear issue and possibly Palestinians.

Primary advantages of a defense treaty for the US:

- Israel's conventional capabilities exceed those of most US allies and it has increasingly come to be viewed as a strategically important regional partner.

- Reduced risks of war in the region and consequently greater stability, thereby decreasing the need for direct American involvement.
- A critical component of the US-led regional security architecture, with the Saudis and others.
- A significant strategic setback for China and Russia in a strategically important region.
- Might facilitate a future phaseout of US military assistance to Israel.

Primary disadvantages of a defense treaty for both Israel and the US:

- Both sides' greatest fear is over a loss of freedom of maneuver: Israel, due to the contractual obligation to consult; the US, the possible need to support Israel in ways that conflict with other interests. This might be resolved by limiting the treaty's scope to severe (or extreme) threats and existential ones.
- China and Russia will view the treaty and regional security architecture, as threats to their interests and may strengthen ties with Iran in response.

Primary disadvantages of a defense treaty for Israel:

- Some argue that bilateral cooperation is already so close, that it would not be materially enhanced, but that Israel would be contractually bound by a treaty's constraints.
- Possible US circumvention of a treaty's necessarily broad and ambiguous language, or of a response that might be too long in coming, to be effective.
- Possible US demand that Israel disclose and dismantle its purported nuclear capabilities.
- Erosion of Israel's national ethos of self-reliance and strategic autonomy.
- Potential demands for phaseout of military assistance.

Primary disadvantages of a defense treaty for the US:

- A problematic precedent; the US has not extended a defense treaty in decades.
- Important constituencies will oppose the treaty. Conversely, Congress will only approve the US-Saudi deal with the strong support of Israel and its American supporters.
- Possibly counter-intuitive effect of emboldening Israel and thereby increasing its freedom of independent action, primarily in regard to Iran's nuclear program.
- The possible need to diverge from long-standing non-proliferation policy and accept Israel as the only US treaty partner, other than the UK and France, reported to be a nuclear power.

We recommend pursuing a US-Israeli defense treaty, as part of the grand deal now under discussion and as further elucidated in the following study.

