

By Ebrahim Beheshti
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PERSPECTIVE

In recent days, there have been reports indicating that the United States is trying to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel and apparently has made progress in this regard. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, in a recent interview with Fox News, stated that his country is now closer than ever to establishing relations with Israel.

Furthermore, following a meeting between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, some media outlets reported that they both agreed on general principles for addressing the Palestinian issue, with a focus on a two-state solution. Additionally, in a remarkable development, two Israeli ministers visited Saudi Arabia in the last two weeks.

It is evident that there are daunting challenges ahead before an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel can be reached. The normalization plan is closely intertwined with two critical issues: Israel's internal turmoil and the political strategy of the Democrats and the Biden administration to use the normalization issue as a trump card in the 2024 presidential election.

Netanyahu seems to view the normalization plan as an opportunity to stabilize his fragile cabinet. The domestic situation in Israel is currently so precarious that even former prime minister Ehud Barak has expressed concerns, stating that Israel is being undermined from within.

On the American front, the Democrats also see the realization of the normalization plan as a chance to boost their electoral prospects and bolster their weak foreign policy performance. However, what appears to be overlooked amidst these political calculations are the rights of the Palestinians and the potential concessions they may receive as a result of normalization. Will Netanyahu, known for his history of disregarding Palestinian rights, be willing

Normalization shrouded in uncertainties



to recognize these rights in the context of normalization?

Reports suggest that one of Saudi Arabia's main conditions for normalization is that Israel accepts the two-state solution, which would involve the creation of an independent Palestinian state with East Al-Quds as its capital.

Following the announcement of the agreement between Biden and Netanyahu regarding the general principles for the two-state solution, the Israeli channel I24NEWS reported that the key question now is how to translate these principles into practice.

Some media outlets have speculated that Netanyahu may view concessions related to the Palestinians or Saudi conditions for normalization as merely symbolic gestures, rather than genuine, binding commitments for Israel.

That's why the Saudi newspaper Al Riyadh recently wrote that the state of normalization is not just about achieving success; what follows is of greater importance.

According to Al Riyadh, regardless of the Saudi conditions, Israel should not assume that the Palestinian issue will fade into oblivion with normalization coming

into force. The concept of normalizing relations should compel Israel to reevaluate its interactions with its neighbors.

This Saudi paper emphasized that "the situation in the Middle East necessitates a 'fundamental shift in Israel's political mindset'."

The central question here lies in whether Israel, particularly Netanyahu and his radical cabinet, are willing to alter their political perspective. This challenge in answering the question has prompted Barak to say that there are no guarantees of achieving normalization. This is a historical irony: when the normalization process is ripe, Israel finds itself with an unconventional government.

The Arabi21 website has already highlighted that even the simplest concessions for the Palestinians could prove difficult for Netanyahu to secure due to staunch opposition from members of his cabinet, such as Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Moreover, there are reportedly other major conditions that Riyadh has placed on the table for normalizing relations with Israel which include a defense treaty

between the United States and Saudi Arabia, as well as an agreement on the nuclearization of Saudi Arabia. Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, an international relations expert, has told Iran Daily: "It's unlikely that Israel would agree to Saudi Arabia's nuclearization. Israel is concerned about the prospect of a Muslim-majority country like Saudi Arabia gaining access to nuclear capabilities, given its substantial influence in the Islamic world. Israel knows that Arab countries are prone to undergoing political changes. Consequently, those in Israel who adhere to orthodox and radical religious beliefs and believe that a war between Muslims and Israel is inevitable are unlikely to support the idea of Saudi Arabia acquiring nuclear capabilities in any capacity."

Ali Nejat, a Middle East affairs expert, also spoke to Iran Daily, saying that both Israel and Saudi Arabia are inclined toward normalization. However, Israel's preference is for normalization without granting special privileges to Saudi Arabia. "Israelis might consider a limited level of nuclearization for Saudi Arabia, particularly at an industrial scale, under US pressure.

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However, it appears that they are open to the idea of forming two states."

Another major obstacle to a comprehensive Middle East peace deal lies in the prevailing public opinion across Islamic countries, where the majority, as indicated by various polls, remains opposed to the idea of normalizing relations with Israel.

On September 18, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) published the results of a survey conducted among the Saudi population, revealing a notable decline in support for a normalization deal with Israel.

According to the poll, even the proportion of those willing to engage in trade relations with Israel without a normalization pact

is quite low. Around one-third of participants expressed their willingness to take initial steps in relations with Tel Aviv that fall short of official diplomatic ties, including supporting cooperation with Israeli companies in areas such as weather and technology. Palestinian-British journalist Abdel Bari Atwan, citing the same polls, emphasized that the leaders signing normalization agreements with Israel do not necessarily represent the sentiments of their people.

"Poll results from the WINEP, which supports Israel, demonstrate a massive decline in Arab nations' support for the normalization agreements between Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Tel Aviv within just one year." Therefore, despite the apparent determination of Saudi Arabia and Israel to normalize ties with the backing of the United States, it is evident that not all the factors required to realize such a deal are within their control.

The road to normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel remains fraught with challenges and uncertainties, especially given the lack of a positive outlook for the future of normalization and the realiza-

China gains foothold in Mideast as US gets isolated

By Syed Ali Hassan
Iran Daily's correspondent in Pakistan

The United States finds itself increasingly isolated in the Middle East, as China expands its influence in the region, exacerbating the gradual decline of the role of the US and its Western allies. China's instrumental role in normalizing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia was one of the more pronounced events that showcased Washington's diminishing presence in the Middle East.

A significant recent development was the visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to China at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping. The move that the two presidents made toward building a strategic partnership between Syria and China serves as a firm response to external forces challenging Syria's sovereignty.

During their meeting, President Xi firmly voiced China's opposition to foreign powers meddling in Syria's internal affairs. He urged all countries involved to recognize Syria's sovereignty and called for lifting illegal and unilateral sanctions against the Arab nation. The two presidents also jointly announced the establishment of a strategic partnership between Syria and China, which encompasses military cooperation and global political coordination.

This marks President al-Assad's second visit to China since assuming office. During their discussions, the leaders delved into bilateral relations, aligned their stances on global matters, and advocated for the expulsion of foreign powers to foster regional peace.

The repercussions of the Syrian president's visit to China are becoming more and more evident. China is progressively gaining access to regional trade markets while simultaneously limiting American influence in West Asian countries. Meanwhile, Syria, with its oil-rich regions under US military occupation, faces aggression from Turkey in the north and intermittent aerial attacks from Israel. The burgeoning defense cooperation between China and Syria, coupled with President Xi's commitment to bolster Syria's economy, will enhance Damascus's autonomy.

President Xi's message to the US, Israel, and Turkey, in light of their actions on Syrian soil, is unmistakable: You should respect Syrian sovereignty.

Tapping into historical figures for public diplomacy

By Abed Akbari
International affairs expert

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Public diplomacy refers to programs aimed at informing or influencing the public opinion of other countries. Public diplomacy can be done through official or private channels, as well as by institutions or individuals. Public diplomacy uses a variety of tools such as

media, cultural events, art, science, and sports. The right use of the capacities of public diplomacy can help strengthen international relations, increase mutual trust and respect, create interaction and cooperation, resolve disputes and conflicts, convey messages and values, and especially "promote an image and increase recognition."

Iran is a country with a rich and glorious history and civilization and has seen many great historical figures in various fields of literary and ar-

tistic science. Avicenna, Saadi, Hafiz, Khayyam, Rumi, al-Biruni, Razi, Atar of Nishapur, and Farabi can each be a symbol of a culture and civilization on their own. With their works and ideas, these characters have influenced not only Iran but the world. They can be adopted as cultural and humanistic models for different societies. Holding conferences, festivals, and cultural and artistic activities about these famous and historical greats is a huge capacity that can strength-

en public diplomacy and increase mutual respect and trust by interacting with people from other countries.

The German government has been using the capacity of the famous German poet Goethe, who has been very influenced by Hafiz for years. The establishment of the Goethe-Institut to helm the education of the German language, introduce the German culture, and award the Goethe Medal to those who have provided outstanding services in the field of cul-

tural exchange has been done in this regard.

Iran's initiative to mark various days in its national calendar after historical Iranian figures can be showcased to the world as a form of public diplomacy that introduces the cultural figures of Iran. For example, the country has marked various days throughout the year after Saadi, Avicenna, Rumi, and Hafiz.

It is also of great importance to tap into the capacity of international organizations such as UNESCO by holding

programs and events to showcase the tangible and intangible works of historical figures and commemorate their qualities and life events. This could particularly be done by holding scientific meetings, publishing books and articles, producing films and TV shows, or naming an award after one of these figures. These programs can help the people of the world better understand Iran and its culture and civilization, advancing Iran's public diplomacy.