



Why US, Saudis want two-state solution, Israel doesn't

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OPINION

Amid the war in Gaza, a major crisis has been brewing, largely behind the scenes, between the United States and Israel over the need for a Palestinian state. The two countries' positions have long diverged — except during the administration of Donald Trump, whose peace proposal envisaged Israel annexing an additional 30 percent of the occupied West Bank and enveloping a conditional Palestinian state in an even more empowered Greater Israel. Now, that divergence has a harder, sharper edge than ever: Washington's strategic goals in the region require a Palestinian state in the long run and Israeli acknowledgment of that aim in the short run; the Israeli cabinet is having none of it.

Much expectation attends a purportedly comprehensive peace proposal that the US and its most important Arab partners have reportedly been working on, soon to be unveiled and then implemented as the Gaza war winds down. The centerpiece of the plan would be a firm commitment to, and timeline for, the creation of a Palestinian state — a process that President Joe Biden has already mapped out in remarks. This agenda is especially important to Saudi Arabia, whose foreign minister has made clear that a commitment to the two-state solution is a prerequisite for normalizing relations with Israel. The plan for a new postwar dispensation that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released on Friday made no such commitment, though it left just enough ambiguity about a possible "permanent arrangement with the Palestinians" not to foreclose that scenario.

withdraw from the West Bank or agree to a formula for the creation of such a state. Instead, what Saudi Arabia and many Western states, possibly including the US, want to avoid is any repetition of the Oslo framework's failures: the lack of an explicit Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian state as an agreed goal, and the overreliance on purely bilateral talks between Israel and the Palestinians. The Biden administration has registered all of this and its implications for US interests. The war has been devastating for the Palestinians in Gaza, but it has very much strengthened Iran's position in the region. This success has led the Iranians to caution their allies to exercise restraint now, to avoid dragging the region into a broader conflict that would put its gains at risk. (The Houthis in Yemen, however, seem not to be listening too carefully.) For its part, the Biden administration has

What direction do you think the disagreement or semi-hostility between Iran and the US will take? Will hostilities be reduced, contained, or escalated?

The current situation is not semi-hostile; it is full-blown hostility.

Perhaps what you mean is that it's not a full-scale war, but in reality, hostility is one of the stages before war. We are indeed witnessing serious tensions in Iran-US relations in the region. Although both sides have shown that they are seeking

to control the crisis, I highly doubt that a direct confrontation between Iran and the US will occur before the presidential elections in the United States, as neither Iran nor the American side is eager for such a confrontation.



A monument in the West Bank town of Jenin bears the outline of Mandatory Palestine, a geopolitical entity that existed between 1920 and 1948 in the region.
● JAAFAR ASHTIYEH/AFP

According to some experts, the US seeks to alleviate tensions between Arabs and Israel by pressuring Israel or determining the fate of Palestine so that it can focus more on Iran and China. Do you concur?

Look, I really think this perspective is flawed. The United States isn't seeking to pressure Israel. Because if they wanted to exert pressure, the first step would be to cut off arms sales to Israel, which simply isn't feasible in the United States. Neither Republicans nor Democrats are interested in pressuring Israel due to the extensive influence that Israelis have on the US Senate, the House of Representatives, and the US government. In fact, they are seeking crisis management, and crisis management has various avenues.

supporters of Hamas and, on the other hand, intervened militarily in the region and received assistance from Turkey and Qatar. What is more, they constantly maintain that this war has dreadful dimensions and is "over the top," but I haven't seen any practical measures from them that would force Israel to reconsider.

To say that their intention is to settle the Palestinian issue so that they can deal with Iran and China is really something. Surely, America is at odds with China, just as it is with Iran. However, this issue is part of a set of disagreements they have with Iran or China, meaning that even if Hamas wasn't an issue, they would still be at odds with Iran. Therefore, I really think this question is fundamentally flawed, especially its first part concerning America's pressure on Israel.

They have, on one hand, pressured

In any case, what would "dealing with Iran" mean to Americans? Does it entail pursuing diplomacy, managing tensions, increasing the pressure to isolate Iran, or even contemplating regime change?

Americans have always stated that their primary goal is to change the behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran

and if that's not possible, to pursue regime change in Iran. The reality is that America's policy towards Iran involves maximum pressure tactics, leveraging crises resulting from sanctions, supporting protesters and dissidents, and engaging in psychological and propaganda operations, all of which they have advanced in recent

years. Serious blows have been dealt in this regard, particularly following the Israel-Gaza conflict, where they have also leaned towards assassination. They have carried out several terrorist actions, either through Israelis or directly by Americans, in Iraq, Syria, and other places in the region.

Do you imagine that anything significant will happen between Iran and the US before the US presidential elections, or will any decision by both parties be postponed until after the elections?

From my perspective, the likelihood of a war between Iran and the United States until next November, which marks the presidential election in the

US, is less than 10 percent. This means that there is a 90 percent chance that such a war will not occur. However, the issue is that they haven't deferred these differences until after the elections, and something "significant" is happening right now. By that I'm referring to the fact that relations between Iran and the United States are at their highest level of tension possi-

ble in recent years, with the difference being that the hot water that Washingtonians have been sitting in is on the brink of boiling.

Currently, there is significant tension in Iran-US relations, which is clearly not war and will not lead to a war either because both sides do not want war, albeit with different motivations.

What's your recommended strategy for confronting the US in a manner that best serves the country's interests?

The best solution is negotiation and dialogue. Truly, why has the door to dialogue and negotiation been closed? From my perspective, we

should engage in dialogue. We currently have a good enough hand. Right now, we have everything we need to negotiate. So, I really don't understand why the two sides aren't negotiating. Besides, a thousand hours of negotiation is better than an hour of war, and adopting any other

solution apart from diplomacy is not reasonable. Unfortunately, in Iran, diplomacy seems to imply compromise, which they consider as tantamount to betrayal, but this neither conforms to international rules nor to the principles of international relations.



US President Joe Biden (L) greets Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in July 2022.
● BANDAR ALGALOU/REUTERS

This contradiction between US and Israeli policies raises troubling quandaries. The Biden administration appears to be working to confront Israelis with the stark choice they face: security through an agreement with Palestinians and normalization with Saudi Arabia (and other Arab and Muslim countries), or inviting further conflict by clinging to occupied Palestinian lands at a heavy cost of antagonized regional relations and declining American sympathies.

But if confronting Israel with that scenario is not enough to move its leaders, will Washington be prepared to make Israeli cooperation with Palestinian statehood a demand rather than a hint?

Before the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas, Washington had ironed out most of their differences with Riyadh over defense and nuclear issues, while simultaneously negotiating with the Israelis over a package of benefits for the Palestinians that could make normalization possible for Saudi Arabia and win the backing, however grudging, of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

The October 7 attack froze this diplomacy. Saudi Arabia quickly announced that it had "paused" all discussion of normalization, until early January, when officials indicated that the kingdom was still interested. Predictably, however, the price Israel would have to pay appears to have gone up. Riyadh now insists that no normalization of relations with Israel can occur without full Palestinian statehood. Nobody expects Israel to immediately

similarly cautioned Israel against attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Netanyahu has repeatedly taken credit for having "for decades blocked the establishment of a Palestinian state," and he knows that, on this point at least, he enjoys solid domestic backing. Last week, Israel's cabinet, followed by the Knesset, rejected any additional Western recognition of Palestinian statehood or other such "international dictates" — regardless of the fact that Israel's own establishment in 1948 was achieved by such recognition.

The bear hug of support that Biden has provided for Israel over Gaza, at times with no international backing, cannot be gratis. The US has a right, indeed a responsibility, to demand Israeli cooperation on this indispensable priority. Failing that, Washington will have to reevaluate the merits of America's special relationship with Israel.

That is unlikely to happen before the US election, but Biden might be more willing to apply the full weight of American influence on Israel if he wins a second term. Historically, second-term presidents — freed from the domestic political constraints of seeking reelection — tend to take on such issues with more determination. And if Biden really believes that US interests — and ultimately Israel's future — rest on the creation of a Palestinian state and normalization with Saudi Arabia, he could act decisively.

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