

Dangerous push for Israeli-Saudi normalization

By Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr
Scholars

OPINION

During his first three years in office, US President Joe Biden based his Middle East strategy on a single, straightforward project: normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such a deal, Washington thought, would stabilize the tumultuous region and constrain an increasingly emboldened Iran. The United States would then be free to shift its resources away from the Middle East and toward Asia and Europe. The Arab world might even become part of an ambitious Eurasian trade corridor connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, an enterprise that could compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

By the fall of 2023, US officials seemed close to brokering an agreement. Saudi Arabia indicated it was ready to normalize ties with Israel if, in exchange, Washington would strike a security pact with Riyadh. The United States was prepared to grant the Saudis their wish. Although the pact would theoretically deepen the United States' regional commitments, American officials hoped that, thanks to a newly strong Israeli-Saudi relationship, Saudi Arabia would rarely need US military assistance.

Then came Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. The assault, which killed roughly 1,200 people, shattered the notion that the Middle East's actors could simply ignore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When Israel responded by launching a devastating invasion of Gaza — one that, so far, has killed more than 39,000 Palestinians — it enraged the Arab world's citizens and cast Iran and its regional allies as frontline defenders of the Palestinian cause. Arab rulers were forced to change course. Saudi Arabia pulled back from the normalization agreement, insisting that Israel first accept Palestinian self-determination. Its neighbors also distanced themselves from Israel.



The illustration shows Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (L), US President Joe Biden (C), and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

American officials are aware that the facts on the ground have shifted, but they are still clinging on to their pre-October 7 vision. Despite the mass demonstrations, they are shuttling back and forth to Riyadh to peddle a deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In fact, US officials seem to think that an agreement is timelier than ever. American policymakers have suggested that Riyadh should normalize ties with Israel if the latter agrees to a cease-fire in Gaza. To Washington, Israeli-Saudi normalization remains the solution to the Middle East's ills.

But this view is, increasingly, a fallacy. Saudi Arabia will not establish relations with Israel in exchange for an end to the war. At this point, Riyadh will establish relations with Israel only if the Jewish "state" takes clear and irrevocable measures to create a Palestinian one. And Israeli officials have shown absolutely no interest in doing this.

If the United States still wants an Israeli-Saudi deal, it will have to lean hard on the Israelis to change their position. It needs to secure not only a cease-fire but also a positive, long-term plan for Gaza's future that ends in Palestinian statehood. It needs, in other words, to show Arab leaders that working more closely with Israel will not further inflame the region with conflicts that undermine their own credibility while strengthening Tehran and its partners. Otherwise, the United States is wasting its time by pushing for normalization — and jeopardizing the security of besieged Arab governments.

Won't back down

Since the war in Gaza began, the United States has had a decidedly mixed diplomatic record in the Middle East. On the one hand, Washington pulled Israel back from the brink of direct confrontation with Iran, after the two exchanged missile fire in April. It is now scrambling to prevent Israel and Hezbollah from entering into all-

out conflict. But when it comes to the heart of the matter — the fighting in Gaza itself — American diplomacy has achieved very little. Washington has failed to influence the conduct of the war; to secure a cease-fire, or to obtain any commitments from Israel about the future of Gaza or a Palestinian state. These failures jeopardize Washington's successes in other domains. So long as the fighting continues, for instance, Israel's standoff with Hezbollah will intensify. Shelling between the two has displaced tens of thousands of Israelis since the onset of the war in Gaza, and so Israel now views securing its northern border as part and parcel of its campaign to destroy Hamas. Such an escalation could invite Iran and its regional actors to intervene to assist their Lebanese partner.

It is not hard to see why the United States has failed to stop the bloodshed. US officials have been pressuring Arab states, particularly Egypt and Qatar, to secure Hamas's acquiescence for a cease-fire deal, but it has barely exercised its considerable leverage over Israel. Instead of threatening to curtail or end offensive aid, Washington's main approach has been to tell Israel that, should it stop fighting, it can have formal relations with Saudi Arabia. This is not a promise that the United States can deliver. The Saudis have refused to offer normalization in exchange for just a cease-fire, and it is unlikely that they will reconsider.

Even if Riyadh were to accept such a deal, there is no guarantee that Israel would consent. The country has rebuffed every call, whether from Wash-

ington or the UN, to end the conflict. It has considered pulling back its forces only temporarily, in order to free Israeli and foreign captives. Israel has proved so committed to the war that it has even jeopardized its ties to the Arab states with which it does have relations. Egypt and Jordan — which normalized ties with Israel in 1978 and 1994, respectively — have cooled diplomatic ties, put their military forces on alert, and warned that their peace treaties with Israel are at risk. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, which both normalized ties in 2020, have reduced diplomatic contacts and business relations.

These moves have clear antecedents. Israel's conduct has inflamed the Arab world and threatened its stability. Egypt has seen mass domestic pro-

tests in support of Palestinians, and the country's leaders worry these demonstrations might turn against them. Cairo has, meanwhile, come under direct pressure from Israel, which violated the countries' 1978 agreement by seizing Gaza's Rafah border crossing. Israel did so without even giving Egyptian officials adequate notice. Other Arab governments that have relations with Israel, including Jordan and Morocco, have also witnessed large-scale street demonstrations. They fear that this popular outrage could eventually explode into an Arab Spring-type uprising or prompt a recrudescence of extremism and terrorism.

Israel's disregard for the interests of its Arab allies is explained, in part, by its all-out drive to destroy Hamas, but it also comes from a sense among Israeli officials that their country does not need regional peace treaties to be secure. Israel assumes that, if the need arises, Washington will control the behavior of Arab states. It also figures that these countries' anger toward Israel is balanced by their fear of Iran. When Tehran lobbed missiles and drones at Israel in April, for example, Jordan and the Persian Gulf monarchies cooperated with the United States to intercept nearly all of them. Israeli officials expect that, as escalation with Iran continues, the Persian Gulf monarchies will have no choice but to close ranks with Israel and the United States, and that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh will terminate their own normalization deals with Tehran.

But Israeli officials are mistaken. Although it is impossible to discern their exact motivations, Jordan and the Persian Gulf states likely helped down Iranian drones and missiles not to protect Israel but to prevent the larger war that would surely have ensued if Israel had been seriously hit. Since normalizing ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have become more secure. (Before those deals,



Protesters wave Palestinian flags during a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Amman, Jordan, on October 20, 2023.

ANNIE SAKKAB/BLOOMBERG