

Iranian-backed groups routinely struck both countries' territories.) They have no interest in reneging on their agreements, especially because their people do not see Iran as the enemy right now. Instead, their nemesis is Israel.

Deal or no deal

To overcome Arab governments' qualms about working more closely with an unchanged Israel, the United States could try to make its partners an offer they can't refuse. In exchange for increased Israeli-Saudi cooperation, for example, Washington might promise the Saudis not just a security pact but one in which Riyadh can maintain close ties to China. The United States could promise Amman that it will respond if Jordan is attacked by Iran, and that it will keep Palestinians from flooding across the Jordanian border. It could extend to Egypt additional economic support as well as guarantees that Israel will pull back from Rafah and desist from any actions that could

push Palestinians into the Sinai Peninsula.

But these promises would be financially and politically costly for the United States, which is already stretched thin, and they are still unlikely to have any effect. Arab governments would, no doubt, love more US support, but there is nothing that Washington can directly provide that would protect them from the rage of their citizens. There is only one workable path to greater Arab-Israeli cooperation, and it entails ending the war in Gaza and setting up a sovereign Palestinian state.

Washington must therefore stop focusing on how it can deliver normalized relations and start focusing on what will happen to Gaza in both the near and long term. In this, it has much work to do. The United States has not put forth a credible plan for the day after the conflict ends, risking anarchy and an endless humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip. In the absence of

US pressure, Gaza could even end up being indefinitely ruled by the Israel Defense Forces. The Israeli cabinet might then direct the IDF to gradually push Gaza's population into Egypt, opening the territory to Jewish settlers. Should that succeed, Israel could force Palestinians out of the West Bank as well. It may not even need the military to do so. Instead, it could simply defund an already enfeebled Palestinian Authority, rendering it unable to deliver services, and then let violent settlers run rampant. Until these scenarios are firmly off the table, no Arab state will agree to normalize relations with Israel.

To save the Palestinians and promote Arab-Israeli ties, the United States must promote an alternative pathway for Gaza's future. It can start by presenting a strategy for how Gaza can be reconstructed and how its security can be ensured. Such a plan must have buy-in from Arab states, which is essential to securing an intra-Pal-

estinian consensus that can keep the strip safe. But only Washington can pressure Israel into ending the war and accepting such a proposal, and only Washington can mediate between Israeli and Arab leaders over a security arrangement for Gaza. Arab states might be hesitant to work with Israel at all, but US leaders should remind them (and the Israelis) that no one benefits from continued turmoil, and that they have a shared interest in creating a sustainable post-war plan. The alternative, after all, is a forever war in Gaza and possibly the West Bank and Lebanon, which would destabilize the entire region.

After there is a viable plan for reconstructing Gaza, the United States can begin to work on its bigger mission: creating a Palestinian state. It must get Israel to recognize the Palestinians' right to self-determination, commit to creating a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and create a diplomatic track to realize it.

This process would have to begin with a permanent cease-fire in Gaza, one in which Israel agrees to end its occupation of Gaza and let a unified Palestinian Authority govern over both Gaza and the West Bank. Such commitments could be enough to win over the Saudis and other Arab governments and open the door to deeper connections.

To be sure, this process will be extremely difficult. Israel is governed by hard-right politicians who have disavowed Palestinian statehood; the gulf between them and Arab governments is massive. But the United States must still make a serious effort to bring these parties together. Until there is a clear path to a Palestinian state, the Middle East will be caught in a continuous cycle of conflict. There will be no hope for regional stability, and there will be little chance that Israel and Saudi Arabia can normalize relations.

The article first appeared on Foreign Affairs.

Don't be fooled

Push for normalization about US dominance

By Edward Hunt
Scholar

OPINION

While Israel continues its military siege of Gaza, the United States is trying to exploit the situation with the goal of strengthening US power in the Middle East. Rather than seeking a long-term solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the United States is prioritizing its longstanding goal of normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. With such a deal, which would require calm in Gaza to bring Saudi Arabia on board, the United States would further marginalize the Palestinians while more tightly integrating Israel into its regional network of alliances and partnerships.

"I think we're at a point where the necessary agreements between the United States and Saudi Arabia are very well within reach," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Congress last month.

US approach

For decades, the United States has dominated the Middle East. A key to US power has been the US-led network of alliances and partnerships that includes Israel and the Arab states. It enables the United States to station tens of thousands of soldiers across the Middle East and quickly surge additional forces into the area. "It's a vast strategic advantage," Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin explained in 2021, referring to the US-led network. "It is unmatched. It is unparalleled. And it is unrivaled."

Egypt and Jordan, both of which now receive extensive economic and military assistance. Most Arab states rejected such deals, insisting that there must first be a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, but some of them changed their positions during the Trump administration. Under the Abraham Accords, several additional Arab states vowed to normalize relations with Israel. They entered into agreements with Israel, enticed by special deals with the United States.

US officials have been nearly unani-

the accords by including Saudi Arabia. President Biden had once promised to make Saudi Arabia into a pariah over its killing of a Washington Post columnist, but he wanted a deal even more, knowing that Saudi Arabia had dropped its longstanding insistence upon the establishment of a Palestinian state as a condition for normalization with Israel. Saudi leaders, it was reported, sought a deal that would merely keep open the possibility of a Palestinian state.

"We've been working — this goes back well before October 7 — working with Saudi Arabia and with Israel to pursue normalization between the two countries," Blinken acknowledged in May. "This would be a game changer."

One of the most striking things about US policy is that the Biden administration has not changed its approach since October 7. Not only has it continued its one-sided support of Israel, but it has moved forward with its plans to bring Saudi Arabia into the accords, even while indicating that the accords may have led to the current crisis.

"I'm convinced one of the reasons Hamas attacked when they did — and I have no proof of this; just my instinct tells me — is because of the progress we were making towards regional integration for Israel and regional integration overall," President Biden said on October 25, just weeks after the attack. "And we can't leave that work behind."

Purpose of US plans

As the Biden administration has chased its imperial ambitions, officials have insisted that relations between Israel and Palestine must change. Without a new arrangement, they say, the cycle of violence will continue. There will be what Blinken called "endless cycles of violence, destruction, death, and insecurity."

At a congressional hearing in May, State Department official Barbara Leaf called the status quo "terrible," especially for the Palestinians. They live "in a state of everything ranging from unhappiness to frustration to rage to despair to militancy," Leaf said. "It's a terrible recipe for militancy, for radicalization."



Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat (L) elbow bumps with an Emirati official ahead of boarding a plane leaving Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on September 1, 2020.
NIR ELIAS/AFP



US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken (front-R) speaks with the families of Israeli captives in Tel Aviv on May 1, 2024.
ODED BALILTY/AP

Although US officials have boasted of their power, their approach has been a major source of instability, especially as it concerns relations between Israel and the Arab states. Since the founding of Israel in 1948 and the Nakba for the Palestinians, many Arab states have refused to recognize Israel. Israel and the Arab states have fought several wars.

The international community has favored a two-state solution, which would create a state of Palestine alongside Israel, but the United States has effectively opposed it, even while rhetorically supporting it. Focused on maintaining its regional network, the United States has pursued bilateral deals with Arab states that are willing to establish peaceful relations with Israel. By the end of the twentieth century, the United States had played a central role in brokering deals with

mous in hailing the Abraham Accords as a great achievement, but critics have pointed out that the accords exclude the Palestinians. In Foreign Policy in Focus, John Feffer has warned that it would be unwise to wish away the Palestinians, especially if there is genuine interest in ending the "fratricide" that has been so destructive to Israelis and Palestinians.

Officials in Washington are aware of the criticisms. "It has been fashionable in some foreign policy circles to believe... that you could somehow achieve peace and stability and security by jumping over the Palestinian issue," Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) acknowledged last month.

Few officials have taken such concerns seriously, however. Before Hamas carried out its October 7 attack against Israel, the Biden administration had been trying to expand

In fact, the Biden administration has insisted that it supports a two-state solution. Its plans for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, administration officials say, will eventually lead to the creation of a Palestinian state. They are even endorsing plans for a cease-fire in Gaza, a move that follows their acknowledgment that Saudi Arabia now requires a period of calm and a pathway to a Palestinian state to enter into a deal.

Still, the Biden administration has made it clear that it opposes the creation of a viable Palestinian state. As it has blocked efforts at the United Nations (UN) to establish a Palestinian state, it has worked to impose constraints on Palestine.

A major priority of the Biden administration is to limit Palestine's security. Administration officials insist that any future Palestinian state must be demilitarized.

"There are a number of types of two-state solutions," President Biden claimed earlier this year. "There's a number of countries that are members of the UN that... don't have their own militaries. Number of states that have limitations... And so, I think there's ways in which this could work."

The Biden administration is also requiring Israel to have a say in the creation of a Palestinian state. It demands that the Palestinians negotiate with the Israelis, despite the fact that the Israeli cabinet and the Israeli public oppose a two-state solution.

When Congress questioned Blinken last month about the administration's plans for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Blinken made note of another condition, which is that any deal would not result in the immediate establishment of a Palestinian state. In fact, Blinken indicated that the US vision of a longer pathway to a Palestinian state is not intended to fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

"The whole point of normalization but also the whole point of the establishment of a Palestinian state is to make sure that Israel's security is better ensured," Blinken said.

Indeed, the Biden administration remains focused on the goal of integrating Israel into the US-led network of alliances and partnerships in the Middle East, just as it had been trying to do before October 7. Rather than trying to achieve a two-state solution that could bring an end to what one US representative recently called "75 years of misery," the administration is working to take advantage of the current crisis for the purpose of strengthening US dominance, regardless of the consequences for the Palestinians.

"Despite the fact that we say those words" — two-state solution — "we have never addressed our policy to use our influence to make it happen," Senator Van Hollen acknowledged.

The article first appeared on Foreign Policy in Focus.