



Saudi price for normalization



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OPINION

On August 14, the US digital news medium, Politico, published an exclusive report. It was based on accounts from three separate sources who had been privy to talks between the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and members of the US Congress.

These talks were the latest in a series of detailed discussions that have been taking place for years between the US and Saudi Arabia. They began during the presidency of Donald Trump and preceded the Abraham Accords. Over time, the shape of a complex agreement of major significance has emerged, clearly aimed at boosting MBS's ambitious program for securing Saudi's future development — his Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016, aimed at breaking the nation's total dependence on oil and promoting additional means of developing the nation's potential. In exchange for commitments by the US to Saudi Arabia covering, among other issues, security, technical assistance with developing a civilian nuclear program, and investment in areas such as high technology, Saudi Arabia would limit its dealings with China and normalize its relations with Israel.

MBS had one proviso before agreeing to breathe life into the draft deal. In line with long-standing Saudi policy, he required firm approval from Israel for the establishment of a Palestinian state. This stark condition has been somewhat modified during the negotiating process. MBS now requires the inclusion in the agreement of "a credible path toward a Palestinian state". Despite widespread global support, including that of the US, for the two-state solution, Benjamin Netanyahu has so far refused to countenance fostering the development of a sovereign Palestine. It could, he has pointed out, bring Iran-sponsored terrorism into the heart of Israel, and place Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion airport under permanent threat of attack. The territories earmarked to form the putative Palestinian state — the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and Gaza — were overrun by Jordan and Egypt during the 1948 Israel-Arab conflict, and administered by them for 20 years. When originally seized, Mandate Palestine had been dissolved, and the land belonged to no sovereign state. During the subsequent two decades, neither Jordan nor Egypt, which occupied those territories, made the slightest effort to form a Palestinian state. The areas were won back by Israel in the Six Day War in 1967 — and in the following years, through astute Palestinian propaganda, they morphed in the public consciousness into "occupied Palestinian land". A political reality has been created, and Israel has been increasingly pressured to support establishing a Palestinian state in them.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (R) speaks to US President Joe Biden during a security and development summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on July 16, 2022. ● AFP

requesting personal protection if or when the deal is ratified. MBS could have indicated that the same considerations might apply to Netanyahu, who might have in mind the tragic end of his predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin. Having signed the first Oslo Accord in 1993 and finalized a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, Rabin died at the hands of an Israeli extremist in November 1995. In truth, though, Netanyahu is more likely to be considering the implications for his precarious cabinet coalition if he gave way on the two-state solution — which would, incidentally, be as unacceptable to Hamas and its followers as to his right-wing ministers. The reason for Saudi Arabia's insistence on "a credible path toward a Palestinian state" is entirely understandable. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative was conceived and proposed by King Salman's predecessor on the throne, his half-brother then-crown prince Abdullah. The Plan, endorsed on a number of occa-

now take into consideration that Hamas, with the support of much of the Arab world, is dedicated to eliminating Israel from the Middle East and would certainly never endorse the idea of Israel continuing to exist alongside a Palestinian state that occupied only a portion of what was once Mandate Palestine. In short, in signing up to the US-Saudi-Israel deal, MBS would be facing not only the fear of assassination but also — whether or not a Palestinian state was part of the deal — endless conflict with Hamas or whatever jihadist organizations succeed it. For it is morally certain there is no foreseeable end to the rejectionist struggle to overthrow Israel and acquire the land "from the river to the sea". World opinion, including Saudi Arabia, that supports the two-state solution needs to face up to this awkward truth: it will never work until the majority of the Palestinian leadership acknowledges that Israel is here to stay and endorses its legitimacy. Since Saudi Arabia and the Arab world are promoting the two-state solution, the ball is in their court. Only they can convert, circumvent, or disempower rejectionist organizations like Hamas. If that is too great an ask, then Saudi Arabia — despite its unique position as leader of the Sunni Muslim world — will need to consider aligning its position with that of other Abraham Accord signatories. All maintain their support for Palestinian aspirations but not at the expense of their own self-interests. They have decided to put establishing a Palestinian state on the back burner and prioritize the substantial benefits to their countries and the region of normalizing relations with Israel. In practical terms, therefore, is the price that Saudi Arabia is asking for a normalization deal with Israel unrealistic? Or will MBS's compromise formula be enough to kick the issue into the long grass and finalize the normalization deal? Or will the current US policy and the weight of public opinion in favor of the two-state solution finally prevail? Time will tell.

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The purported military benefits to the United States of Israeli-Saudi normalization are also overblown. In theory, the agreement would offer the United States some marginal military advantages when it comes to containing Iran. Washington might use new access to Saudi waters and airspace to improve its ability to track and disrupt Iran-backed groups and interdict weapons shipments bound for its backed groups. But in practice, the military gains would be minimal. Saudi Arabia, like other Persian Gulf Arab countries, seeks to avoid open conflict with Iran and its backed groups, so it has been reluctant to help the United States fend off Houthi attacks in the Red Sea or act against Iranian-backed groups elsewhere in the region. The agreement is unlikely to change that fact.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud meet in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in April 2024. ● EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/REUTERS

Even if it did, the additional access in Saudi Arabia would not give Washington much of a leg up: trying to deter low-intensity armed group activity with ever-grander displays of US hard power has often proved disappointing. Iranian-backed armed groups have become masters at inflicting damage to Israel and US bases in Iraq and Syria with just enough restraint to avoid crossing US redlines or triggering escalation. The United States' campaign to stop Houthi attacks on commercial shipping over the past year is a case in point. Even senior US military officials have acknowledged the operation has been a costly failure because the Houthis have successfully dispersed their weapons and personnel. Washington is not hamstrung by its capabilities or access. It has decided that conducting a larger ground operation, which is probably necessary to stop Houthi attacks by force, is not worth risking American lives or a wider war. With this experience in the rearview, it is doubtful that additional

military access in the region would make the United States safer. Perhaps most worrying, a normalization agreement would bog down the United States in the Middle East at a time when the White House should be prioritizing other global challenges, such as countering Beijing in the South China Sea. Despite receiving millions of tons of advanced weaponry from France, Germany, and the United States, Saudi Arabia needs outside help to defend itself. In the event of a war, it would likely prove more of a liability for Washington than a valued partner. The United States should continue to assist Saudi Arabia in developing niche capabilities it needs to protect itself, such as air defense systems. But it should avoid making a sweeping commitment to send US troops and materiel to defend the regime from external aggression. Such a pledge might dissuade Riyadh from pursuing conciliation with its neighbors and embolden the kingdom to take risks. The deal would also harm the Middle East in more subtle ways. The relentless pursuit of Israeli-Saudi normalization has sidetracked Washington from helping the region make progress on its actual sources of conflict and extremism. To end the war in Gaza, for example, the United States will need to apply greater and more direct pressure on Israel. Instead, US officials have behaved as if they can resolve the conflict by dangling the carrot of normalization. More broadly, the Biden administration's preoccupation with this deal has distracted it from other looming problems in the Middle East, including authoritarianism, corruption, human rights abuses, the lack of economic opportunities for young people, and climate change. Whoever moves into the White House in January would do well to remember that these thorny and deeply rooted afflictions won't be solved through accords orchestrated by an outside power. Instead, these problems require patient and painstaking work by the region's governments, with greater involvement from their citizens. Pushing these partners to take responsibility for their future and their own security through more inclusive, accountable, and transparent governance should be the centerpiece of the next US administration's Middle East policy. Helping tackle these endemic issues is more worthwhile than the pursuit of an illusory pact that will leave the United States worse off than before.

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Assassins posing as Egyptian soldiers fire on Egyptian president Anwar Al-Sadat in Cairo, Egypt, on October 6, 1981. In 1978, Sadat and Menachem Begin, prime minister of Israel, signed a peace treaty brokered by US president Jimmy Carter. ● MAKARAM GAD ALKAREEM/AFP

Politico's revelations about the latest round of talks include two apparently contradictory elements. On the one hand, the reports indicate that MBS seems intent on striking this mega-deal with the US and Israel; on the other that he appears worried by the possibility of assassination if he does so. He is reported to have cited the fate of the Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat following his 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Sources say that he questioned whether the US had offered Sadat effective protection and appeared to be

sions by the Arab League, advocates a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine dispute. Given that, and a just resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue, the Plan promises full normalization of relations between the Muslim world and Israel. In September 2021, when King Salman addressed the UN General Assembly, he reiterated Saudi Arabia's commitment to the 2002 Plan, ignoring the fact that it was drafted well before Hamas gained control of Gaza in 2007. Members of the League must