Case against Israeli-Saudi normalization

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stand in front of a map of the Middle East in May 2021.
● HAIM ZACH/GETTY IMAGES

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OPINION

When President Joe Biden leaves office early next year, he will probably do so without having realized a signature item on his agenda for the Middle East — a diplomatic normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, sealed by a formal US security guarantee to Riyadh. Yet this elusive agreement runs the risk of being picked up again by his successor, no matter who wins the election in November. While in office, former president Donald Trump was among Saudi Arabia's biggest supporters, and he has already signaled his desire to expand the so-called Abraham Accords — a series of bilateral agreements between Israel and a handful of Arab countries, negotiated under his watch — to include Saudi Arabia. Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate, could be compelled to revive the deal or some variation of it, both for the sake of continuity and because hammering out a grand bargain in this troubled region would be a foreign policy achievement for a relatively inexperienced politician. But for Harris or Trump, continuing to elevate this regional accord would be a grave mistake. The proposed arrangement will not end the war in Gaza, solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, block China's inroads to the Middle East, or counter Iran and its armed groups. Instead, by committing Washington to defend an Arab state with a history of destabilizing behavior, the pact's main achievement will be to further entangle the United States in a region that successive US presidents have tried to pivot away from.

The single-minded pursuit of this bad deal has also blinded US policymakers to other, more important drivers of conflict in the region, and it has caused the United States to delay efforts to ramp up pressure on Israel to end its war in Gaza. The next US president should therefore jettison the proposed accord and focus Middle East policy instead on the economic and social issues most important to the region.

Raw deal

Though an Israeli-Saudi agreement has yet to be finalized, its broad outlines have already become clear. According to the terms of the proposed accord, Saudi Arabia would formally recognize Israel in return for Washington's commitment to establish an independent Palestinian state. The United States would promise to defend Saudi Arabia from external attack and support Riyadh's civilian nuclear program, and the Saudis would give Washington new military access to the kingdom's territorial waters and airspace. Riyadh would also pledge to restrict Chinese military bases and security cooperation in Saudi Arabia, including forgoing purchases of advanced Chinese technology and weapons and limiting some Chinese investment in the Saudi economy.

Concluding the deal has an obvious appeal for both Israeli and Saudi leaders. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could present it as a political win after facing heavy domestic criticism for failing to prevent Hamas's horrific October 7 attacks and prolonging the military campaign in Gaza. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman also remains intent on signing some version of the agreement because it offers the kingdom protection, substantial economic benefits, and the prestige of being counted among the United States' closest allies.

As for Washington, Israeli-Saudi normalization may seem to offer a way to advance a two-state solution — thus ending a conflict that has sucked up US resources and attention — while blocking the growing influence of China in the Middle East. But on inspection, normalization would achieve neither of these aims. For starters, the deal won't be the path to peace between Israelis and Palestinians that Washington hopes it to be. There is simply no evidence that Netanyahu — or any Israeli cabinet — will make and adhere to the concessions needed to create a Palestinian state, which Riyadh has demanded as a prerequisite, no matter what economic and security benefits Saudi normalization might bring. Added to this, Israeli public support for Palestinian statehood has dropped since the Hamas attack: according to a spring 2024 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, just over a quarter of Israelis now support such an arrangement.

Even if Israel and Saudi Arabia were to arrive at some agreement, the prospects that it would create lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians are slim. According to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, a majority of Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank support armed struggle against Israel. Some Israelis are armed and radicalized and might also try to sabotage such a deal. In fact, even the normalization deals that Israel has already signed appear to be on shaky ground. After October 7, protests against the Abraham Accords broke out in Morocco and Bahrain. Arab and Israeli leaders are having trouble upholding commitments that have already been made. It would be especially hard for them to adhere to new ones.

The deal also wouldn't give the United States any real advantage over China in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been expanding relations with a range of outside powers, including China and Russia, on energy and trade to avoid overreliance on the United States. Riyadh thinks a diversity of partners will attract better economic opportunities and allow access to more advanced technology and military systems, especially in areas in which the United States lacks a competitive edge. China and Saudi Arabia, for example, are working together on infrastructure and technology projects, as well as on renewable energy initiatives. The deal would not prohibit this activity, so this trend is likely to continue either way.

The agreement would block Beijing's military activities by preventing China from building military bases in Saudi Arabia and limiting Saudi acquisition of Chinese weapons and domestic surveillance technology. But these are near-meaningless concessions: military ties are not the main source of Beijing's growing influence in Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, in the broader Middle East. Today, China has no permanent military presence or planned military bases in Saudi Arabia and is not a major weapons supplier to the kingdom, and the two countries rarely train their forces together. More importantly, the economic and commercial partnerships that are the real drivers of China's regional leverage would be left largely untouched.

Notably, US efforts to push China out of other Middle Eastern countries have come up short. In the nearby United Arab Emirates, for instance, Microsoft recently announced a $1.5 billion investment in G42, an Emirati artificial intelligence company, brokered with the help of the US government. In return for Microsoft's funds, G42 agreed to sell off its Chinese investments and remove Chinese-produced technology from its systems in favor of US components and services. Since Microsoft's announcement of the investment, however, complications have emerged. For example, although G42 has reduced ties with Chinese companies, other Emirati firms have not. As a result, the talent and know-how that G42 gains from its partnership with Microsoft could easily flow into firms in the UAE that have deeper relationships with Chinese investors, possibly defeating the purpose of the restrictions.

The terms of the proposed US-Saudi deal are quite different than those between Microsoft and G42, of course, but some of the same challenges apply. Trying to selectively limit Chinese technology and investments inside Saudi Arabia would be difficult, and Beijing would likely maintain a significant and sometimes hard-to-detect presence in the kingdom. Even under the potential accord, for instance, China would probably retain its investments in Saudi ports, which might be leveraged for under-the-radar military operations or to refuel or resupply Chinese military ships. The deal, then, is a poor way to deprive China of a foothold in the kingdom.

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Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) representatives sign six agreements valued at up to $50 billion with leading Chinese financial institutions to enhance bilateral capital flows on August 1, 2024.
● SAUDI PIF