

# Getting to an Israeli-Saudi Deal on Tiran and Sanafir

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Efforts to reach an agreement during President Biden’s visit are laudable, but the administration must take care to ensure that any deal with Riyadh preserves the crucial regional security arrangements enshrined in the Egypt-Israel peace treaty.**

**A**lthough [energy pledges \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/facts-whats-behind-our-energy-crunch-and-high-gas-prices\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/facts-whats-behind-our-energy-crunch-and-high-gas-prices) top the list of deliverables from President Biden’s upcoming trip to the Middle East, the administration also sees an opportunity to [advance regional peace \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOWNsX99kPc\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOWNsX99kPc), in part by brokering a deal over the disposition of two small Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir. Yet while an Israeli-Saudi agreement on this matter would be a notable foreign policy win for the president, the issue is more complicated than it looks. Despite the positive changes that have taken place in Arab-Israel relations over the past few years, ongoing security concerns necessitate that Riyadh and Egypt—the country currently in possession of the islands—make significant concessions before implementing the transfer.

## Decades of Shifting Ownership

**T**he historical ownership of Tiran and Sanafir is the subject of some dispute, as described in detail in a [March 2019 paper by Karim Adel Kebaish \(https://texaslawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Kebaish.V97.4.pdf\)](https://texaslawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Kebaish.V97.4.pdf). Nearly a quarter century before the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded, a 1906 agreement between the Ottoman Empire and the British established Egyptian sovereignty over the islands. With Riyadh’s express permission, the Egyptian military occupied the islands in 1950 in order to constrain the fledgling state of Israel. Seven years later, however, Saudi diplomats challenged Egypt’s sovereignty at the United Nations.

In 1967, Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser leveraged the islands to close the Straits of Tiran, limiting Israel's maritime access to the port of Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba. This in turn provoked an Israeli preemptive strike, and by the end of the ensuing Six Day War, Israel had captured the two islands along with the Sinai Peninsula. All of these territories were fully returned to Egypt in 1982, three years after it signed the landmark peace treaty with Israel. Yet the international community still felt obliged to monitor demilitarization of the Sinai and freedom of navigation through the straits. Accordingly, military and civilian personnel from a dozen countries were stationed in the peninsula and Tiran under the auspices of the newly created Multinational Force & Observers (MFO).

Forty years on, nearly 1,700 MFO personnel, including about 450 Americans, continue to monitor Egypt and Israel's compliance with the treaty. Yet the Tiran portion of this arrangement was called into question in 2016, when Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi reached an agreement with Saudi Arabia that sovereignty over the islands would be transferred to the kingdom. Although the reasoning behind Sisi's decision was never formally explained, many speculate that it was spurred by the estimated \$25 billion in aid and investments Riyadh had pledged to Egypt around this time. Whatever the case, the agreement infuriated many Egyptian nationalists and fueled efforts to scuttle the deal in court, though it was eventually rubber-stamped by the Egyptian parliament in June 2017. Since then, officials in Egypt, Israel, Washington, the MFO, and Riyadh have been discussing how best to transfer the islands to Saudi custody without eroding the security guarantees for Israel enshrined in the Camp David Accords.

## Israeli Priorities

Israel's principal concern about the transfer is ensuring continued freedom of navigation through the Red Sea to Eilat. Technically, this right is guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, so it is not dependent on the treaty with Egypt or other bilateral agreements. Given past experience, however, Israel has unsurprisingly sought written assurances from Saudi Arabia that it will continue honoring this right.

According to various reports, Riyadh has high-level political

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/23/benjamin-netanyahu-secret-meeting-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman>) and military (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802>) contacts with Israel and recently changed its regulations to allow (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/dozens-of-israeli-business-and-tech-figures-visit-saudi-arabia-report/>) Israeli businesspeople to visit the kingdom. Yet in the absence of a formal normalization accord, relations may not have advanced to the point where Riyadh is willing to sign any agreements directly with Jerusalem. A workaround is reportedly being considered (<https://www.axios.com/2022/06/29/israel-saudi-arabia-egypt-red-sea-deal-normalization>) in advance of President Biden's trip: Riyadh could deposit a written commitment with Washington to honor freedom of navigation, an arrangement that would satisfy Israel. Jerusalem will no doubt also want to ensure that the islands remain demilitarized.

Other potential Israeli requests relate to civil aviation. In 2018, Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to Air India flights operating between New Delhi and Tel Aviv, shortening the route by two hours. And after the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, the kingdom permitted Israeli overflights en route to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Given the improved regional environment—not to mention a desire for foreign policy triumphs in the run-up to Israel's early election (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israeli-government-falls-new-election-and-implications-us-israel-relations>) this November—officials in Jerusalem could conceivably press Washington to lobby the Saudis about letting flag carrier El Al access the kingdom's airspace. This would not only make El Al more competitive on the route, but also constitute the most significant overt move toward Israeli-Saudi normalization to date, hypothetically aiding Prime Minister Yair Lapid at the polls. In addition, Israel may reportedly advocate for direct flights to Mecca so that Israeli Muslims can participate in pilgrimages more easily.

# Strategic Considerations

**W**hether or not the Saudis are ready to consider these air travel proposals, the fact is that Washington and Israel have more urgent priorities to discuss with them. For example, Riyadh has made clear that once it takes possession of the islands, it will no longer host the small MFO contingent on Tiran, creating a gap in coverage over traffic in the straits. Alternative arrangements must therefore be made beforehand as part of any U.S.-brokered agreement, compensating for the diminished maritime visibility and preserving Camp David security provisions. Specifically, Washington should ask Egypt to provide the MFO with the necessary permissions and logistical support to establish a surveillance post in south Sinai looking across the straits toward Saudi Arabia. This task could be accomplished easily using modern technology, including advanced cameras or aerostat balloons. Similar observation efforts have been conducted since 1982 from a mountaintop on Tiran, so the request should not be problematic for Cairo.

The changing status quo is also an opportunity to renew America's commitment to the MFO, which has underpinned confidence in the Egypt-Israel peace treaty for more than four decades. Despite the MFO's critical role, multiple U.S. administrations have sought to downsize the U.S. force contribution, the organization's backbone. Yet even today, amid the Abraham Accords and other positive regional dynamics, Egypt-Israel peace remains the fulcrum of stability in the Middle East. To demonstrate its support for peace and its willingness to maintain a U.S. military presence in the region, the Biden administration should commit to keeping the MFO's American contingent at or near its current level indefinitely, thereby preserving the force's integrity.

Finally, senior-level U.S. attention on Tiran, Sanafir, and the MFO would be a good occasion to review the status of Egypt-Israel peace itself. Relations between Cairo and Jerusalem have never been better, but the treaty's security provisions could be undermined down the road by Egypt's increasing militarization (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/03/egypt-israel-peace-sinai-islamic-state-military-terrorism-treaty/>) of the Sinai, including the presence of forces, equipment, and military construction activities that violate the Camp David Security Annex. These efforts are intended to fight elements of the Islamic State, but as Egypt becomes more effective at containing the Sinai terrorism threat, Washington should urge it to redeploy excess forces and equipment west of the Suez Canal.

## Conclusion

**T**he Biden administration should be credited with trying to finalize the transfer of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia—a move that could help improve the dismal state of U.S.-Saudi relations, create additional points of contact between Riyadh and Jerusalem, and ultimately advance the cause of regional peace. Yet in attempting to produce a deliverable from the president's trip, the administration must make sure to cross all the t's and dot all the i's. As recently as a decade ago, the Egypt-Israel peace treaty was tested when the "Arab Spring" led to serious diplomatic rifts between the two countries. To ensure regional stability and Israeli security, any agreement on Tiran and Sanafir should include more than just a deposited Saudi pledge to honor freedom of navigation. Like so many challenges in the Middle East, transferring these islands is much more than just a real estate deal.

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