

# Biden's Legacy and Netanyahu's Missed Moment?

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Articles & Testimony

## The coming months still hold hope for the president's dream of Israeli-Saudi normalization, but only if Netanyahu stands up to his far-right coalition partners.

President Joe Biden's announcement that he will not seek re-election and instead focus the remainder of his term solely on being president has upended the American political discourse less than four months before the presidential election. It also transforms—and, at least in the US, will do much to sideline—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington this week.

While there is already much to discuss regarding Biden's presidential legacy in the Mideast, an interesting question emerges. If Biden no longer needs to focus on the campaign, can he do something to enhance his legacy before the end of his term? Moreover, could this intersect with Netanyahu's visit?

Biden speaks with great passion about freeing the 116 Israeli hostages in Gaza and is known to give out his cell number to the hostage families. One can assume he will give their release his all.

Beyond this, there is no doubt that for Biden, a self-proclaimed lifelong Zionist, peace between the Jewish state and Saudi Arabia, the most powerful Arab state and guardian of the two holiest cities in Islam, would be a crowning accomplishment. His administration has worked intensively in the last year to make Israeli-Saudi normalization a reality under the guise of 'regional integration,' which doubles as a bid to isolate Iran and form an Israel-Arab alliance against it. Every few weeks, at least one of his key senior advisors is in Riyadh. There is an Abraham Accord—why shouldn't there be a Joseph (Biden) Accord?

This is not just Biden's dream: Israelis have long wanted to make peace with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, when Netanyahu

met then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009, his first question was whether there could be a diplomatic breakthrough between Israel and Riyadh. Such a deal is more important than ever for Netanyahu, who faces a reckoning over the failure of October 7 and his broader role in dividing Israeli society, and seeks a legacy achievement to cap off almost two decades as prime minister. Moreover, any deal with Saudi Arabia would not just end Israel's war with Sunni Arab states, it would be the best chance to isolate Iran and its proxies in the Mideast.

Netanyahu has often claimed isolating Iran as an organizing principle of his premiership. Yet, with the chance to advance just such a deal in his speech to Congress, it is a tragic irony that Netanyahu is likely to miss the moment due to Israeli domestic politics and fear of his far-right coalition partners.

## The Case for Israel

**T**he core case for an Israel-Saudi deal, always strong, has been supercharged by October 7 and the ensuing war. The need to isolate Iran has never been clearer for those seeking stability in the Mideast. While Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's plan to ignite what Iranian regional mastermind Qassem Suleimani (assassinated by the US in 2020) called the regional "ring of fire" of militant groups and Iranian proxies surrounding Israel on October 7 failed to generate the frequency or intensity of attacks he hoped for, he is undoubtedly pleased that Israel is fighting on seven fronts: Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

The Houthi drone strike in Tel Aviv on Thursday, followed by Israel's retaliation at the Yemeni port of Hodeida, where Iranian missiles are transferred to the Houthis, is a stark reminder that Iran is orchestrating the regional effort against Israel. This is the first time Israel has ever hit Yemen, and is one of the longest-range strikes ever conducted by the Israeli air force—Tehran is closer to Eilat than Hodeida.

On the fateful night of April 13-14, Israel learned it is best to face Iran as part of a broad-based coalition. The US, Britain, France, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, at different levels, joined Israel to rebuff more than 400 missiles and drones fired by Iran and its proxies. For Israel, this was a glimpse into the future of a regional anti-Iran coalition, unimaginable only a few years ago. Much credit should go to US Central Command (CENTCOM), whose years of diligent behind-the-scenes work paid off brilliantly. Yet, one cannot assume that this regional command will be able to sustain this coalition or deepen cooperation amid the regional turmoil over the Palestinian issue. There must be positive drivers to build on the now-proven potential of moderate actors working together against Iran and other extremists.

## The Case for Saudi Arabia

**W**here peace with Israel was once unthinkable, Riyadh now sees real value. There is a generational shift in leadership under Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who is more flexible than his father and largely unbound by concern for the status quo. While King Salman only envisioned peace with a Jewish state at the end of a peace process, after a Palestinian state was established (Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 and after Saudi Arabia was under pressure for 9/11), the Crown Prince seeks only real commitments that the process will enable the future possibility of a two-state solution. Saudi Arabia also sees the economic and defense benefits of peace with Israel and access to its dynamic high-tech sector. Yet, these have been offset by Israel's unpopularity in the Arab world during the Gaza War.

The Kingdom's strongest reason for seeking peace with Israel is the instrumental political value of linking it to what Riyadh wants most: a US-Saudi defense treaty to safeguard against an Iranian attack. Saudi Arabia likes people to realize it is not part of a NATO situation that would virtually guarantee American retaliation. While such a treaty would struggle to gain the required two-thirds support in the US Senate, combining it with Israel-Saudi normalization could push the package over the threshold. Such a pact would be the first since the defense treaty with Japan in 1960, a far less polarized time in America.

## What's Missing?

While core aspects of the US-Saudi deal have been agreed to behind the scenes, two political components are missing. First, can Israel give the Saudis the necessary political conditions for normalization by making commitments on the Palestinian issue? This demand clearly stems from the Saudis' need for regional cover, especially amid the Gaza War, rather than being the personal views of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia is not asking for a specific date for a two-state solution, nor "irreversible steps" toward an independent Palestinian state, as they did in previous months, but they want to know Israel can commit to credible negotiations with Palestinians that make "two states" a possibility, not a pre-ordained outcome or a precondition.

Netanyahu's speech to Congress on Wednesday would be an auspicious public setting for such a statement. Yet fear of Betzalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir's threats to bring down his government has apparently gripped the prime minister, even though the Knesset will soon enter a three-month recess where the threat of a no-confidence vote dissipates. If Netanyahu so chooses, that is a lot of time to work with.

Second, can enough Democrats be found to support a US-Saudi treaty? Democrats have been more apprehensive about the Saudis due to the Kingdom's strong support of the Republican Party, its ties to American big oil corporations, and human rights violations, including the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

It seems only a Democratic president can sway sufficient Democratic senators—along with many Republicans—to push support for a defense treaty over the two-thirds threshold. As Richard Nixon persuaded Republicans in his breakthrough visit to China in 1971, it could take a Biden to win over skeptical Democratic senators for a treaty. Leading Republican supporter of Israel Senator Lindsey Graham has made precisely this argument for over a year.

Why, some would argue, wouldn't the Saudis wait to see if Trump wins? Those with Graham's view don't believe Trump can reach 67 yes votes on a treaty since he will inevitably need Democratic senators on board. The Saudis will not accept anything less than a defense treaty, since they see a commitment anchored in American law as their best guarantee of defense against Iran.

By stepping aside, Biden simultaneously upended a close election race and freed himself to focus on cementing his legacy with a major geostrategic win for the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and moderate states in the Middle East. But time is short. Once Biden exits the stage, will the window of Saudi normalization with Israel be closed? Will everyone look back at a Middle East moment of possibility as the road not taken?

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