



The Role of Special Advisor for Middle East Normalization

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Reports that the Biden administration is [considering](#) the appointment of a senior diplomat to coordinate US diplomacy around the recent and possible future normalization agreements between Israel and Arab- and Muslim-majority states are a welcome development. As the J Street Policy Center recommended in our December 2022 report "[Israeli-Arab Normalization and Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution](#)," the appointment of a Special Advisor or similar official could help better direct and advance normalization and regional integration. Critically, a key part of this role should be leveraging the momentum and new structures of normalization to bring in the Palestinians and advance Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.

The Need for a Special Advisor for Middle East Normalization

Unlike his predecessors over the last three decades, President Joe Biden has not appointed a Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations. The administration has instead repeatedly emphasized support for the Abraham Accords and pledged to expand them to new parties. Yet advances on this front have been limited to the creation of structures like the Negev Forum and the "I2U2" which, while providing a beneficial framework for cooperation among states that already have diplomatic relations with Israel, have yet to result in additional normalization agreements.

This lack of progress in adding new parties to the Accords can in part be traced to the ongoing and deepening Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Saudi Arabia -- by far the biggest potential prize in normalization efforts -- has repeatedly [made clear](#) that Israel taking or accepting steps toward Palestinian statehood is a prerequisite to mutual recognition and establishment of full relations with Israel. Other countries have given similar indications that normalization with Israel may be too heavy a lift in the absence of real progress in addressing Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, including the occupation of Palestinian territory and its inherent injustices.

Meanwhile, advocates aligned with the Trump Administration's aspirations for the normalization agreements as both an end-run around the Palestinians and a regional military alliance against threats posed by Iran have [pushed](#) the US government to take steps that could harm US interests. These include massive advanced arms sales and significant new US security commitments to autocratic Middle East countries, and even greenlighting and enabling nuclear weapons-threshold activities for Saudi Arabia. Without a Special Advisor mandated to prioritize the integration of Palestinian officials and issues into normalization efforts, the Biden Administration risks allowing such hawkish voices to continue to shape the trajectory of the Accords into one that makes increased regional instability and conflict more likely, instead of one that advances US interests.

How a Special Advisor for Middle East Normalization Can Make Diplomatic Progress

As we set out in [our December 2022 report](#), the administration can take a number of steps to increase the prospects for mutually-catalyzing diplomatic breakthroughs on the normalization and Israeli-Palestinian fronts. Many of these would be most effectively coordinated by a Special Advisor:

- **Treat Palestinians as a full and equal partner in normalization efforts and structures.** This includes, but is not limited to, full participation in the Negev Forum, a regional architecture which Palestinians and Jordan – which has indicated that it will not join in the absence of Palestinian participation – should both be incentivized to join.
- **Work with the Arab League to update and recommit to the Arab Peace Initiative.** Adopted by the Arab League in 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative (API) offers Israel comprehensive peace and normal relations with all Arab states – conditioned on establishment of a Palestinian state. Working toward an updated API would reaffirm that a two-state solution remains key for full Israeli normalization with the entire Arab world.
- **Pair normalization moves by Arab states with benefits for Palestinians.** Arab states should reward Israeli concessions, with particular focus on Israeli steps that do not simply improve Palestinian quality of life, but could carry political momentum. Examples could include: fostering Palestinian energy independence, allowing building master plans for Palestinians in Area C, establishing a joint forum on reducing tensions in Jerusalem, and moving ahead with an agreement to develop the Gaza Marine gas field.
- **Find and enhance roles for particular Middle Eastern countries.** There are several regional countries that are motivated to play significant positive roles on this issue, including Morocco, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. The US, especially with a Special Advisor at the helm, would be in a strong position to identify how these countries can best contribute.
- **Work with Europe to incentivize Israel to involve Palestinians in normalization and regional structures.** Easier access to EU funds for Israeli companies, harmonizing mobile communications schemes, an export agreement for Israeli organic produce, and an arrangement allowing Israel to adopt European food standards to reduce the cost of living could all be on the table to incentivize Israel to accept Palestinian representation and Palestinian issues in regional mechanisms.

Congress also has an important role to play in supporting a Special Advisor's success by emphasizing the need to incorporate Palestinians and issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their work. Lawmakers broadly backed the [Israel Relations Normalization Act](#), ultimately enacted as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022, which reiterated the US commitment to a two-state solution to the conflict and required the administration to provide an assessment of how the ongoing normalization process can be used to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace. Legislation addressing the Abraham Accords which omits references to Palestinians and the conflict should be treated as an attempt to subvert this consensus and avoided.