



ISSUE BRIEF: ISRAEL-SAUDI ARABIA NORMALIZATION MUST ADVANCE US & REGIONAL INTERESTS

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The Biden Administration's [push](#) for a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia presents a significant opportunity for the advancement of US interests in the Middle East, especially in terms of addressing the deepening Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, yielding to Saudi Arabia's demands for more advanced arms, US security commitments and a nuclear program with substandard nonproliferation safeguards – while deprioritizing Palestinian concerns, democracy and human rights – would undermine critical US interests and contribute to regional instability.

Advancing US Interests in Israeli-Saudi Arabia Normalization Efforts

Saudi Arabia is by far the biggest potential prize in Israeli normalization efforts. The de facto leader of Sunni Gulf states, Saudi Arabia wields tremendous influence across the region. The Saudi government's views impact how many Arab- and Muslim-majority countries deal with Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians, particularly as the architect and guardian of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Saudi Arabia has often [indicated](#) that steps toward Palestinian statehood are a prerequisite to establishment of full relations with Israel. Other countries in the region 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. Morocco's recent [cancellation](#) of a Negev Forum summit in response to Israel's announcement that it was advancing thousands of new West Bank settlement units shows how the deepening conflict can hinder normalization efforts.

As the J Street Policy Center set out in our December 2022 report "[Israeli-Arab Normalization and Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution](#)," this seeming challenge to further normalization agreements actually presents an opportunity to advance US, Israeli and Palestinian interests in easing the conflict and creating momentum toward a political horizon for its peaceful end. Chief among the items the United States and Saudi Arabia should seek to secure in connection with a normalization agreement between the latter and Israel are:

1. An Israeli commitment not to annex West Bank territory, except by mutual agreement with the Palestinians.
2. Providing a political horizon for the peaceful end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by securing: A) an official Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative (API), as updated in 2013; and B) an Israeli commitment to engage in various settings, including multilateral talks that include the Palestinians, toward resolution of conflict issues using the API, the Geneva Initiative, the 2016 Obama-Kerry Principles and other international consensus models as references.

3. A meaningful halt to new settlements and settlement expansion, including an end to retroactive authorization of outposts and the establishment of new unauthorized outposts.
4. A halt to demolitions of Palestinian homes and structures and to evictions of Palestinians from their communities, including in East Jerusalem.
5. Approval of master plans and building permits for Palestinian communities in Area C except in extraordinary cases.
6. Connection of Palestinian communities in Area C to Israeli government-provided water and other utilities on the same terms as Israeli settlers, and an end to destruction of water sources used by Palestinians.
7. A halt to legal and administrative changes constituting functional de jure annexation of West Bank territory and reversal to such changes that have already been instituted (in particular, the transfer of responsibility for managing most aspects of civilian life in the West Bank from the military commander of the occupied Palestinian territory to Israel's civilian leadership - specifically, Minister Bezalel Smotrich).
8. Redesignation of substantial portions of the West Bank from Area C to direct Palestinian Authority administrative control (as areas A or B) that enhance territorial continuity of a future Palestinian state.
9. Moves to bolster the Palestinian Authority, including an end to punitive suspensions of customs duties transfers, encouragement of elections and facilitation of voting for East Jerusalem residents, and support for large-scale, national economic projects that address infrastructure needs, industry, agriculture, international trade and financial stability.
10. An Israeli commitment to stop settler violence and protect Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, in line with requirements under international law, and to enforce legal accountability for Israeli civilians who incite or commit violent attacks against Palestinians.
11. A commitment to preserve the status quo on the Temple Mount, and the establishment of a joint regional forum on reducing tensions in Jerusalem.
12. Easing restrictions on the movement of goods and people in and out of the Gaza Strip, consistent with security needs, as well as pursuing the development of the Gaza marine gas field and the construction of a port in Gaza.

The United States Must Not Subordinate Its Interests to Normalization at Any Price

Israel's government has so far indicated little willingness to make meaningful moves with respect to the Palestinians in the context of normalization with Saudi Arabia, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [characterizing](#) the discussion of such issues as, "sort of a checkbox. You have to check it to say you're doing it." Nonetheless, prominent US lawmakers have [warned](#) that there could be difficulty in securing broad Congressional support for a deal that ignores the Palestinians.

Additionally, advocates aligned with the Trump Administration's vision of normalization have long viewed the Abraham Accords as both an end-run around the Palestinians and as the framework for a regional military alliance against nuclear and other threats posed by Iran (which the J Street Policy Center has [argued](#) are better countered via diplomacy). Those advocating this vision are pushing the United States to take steps that could harm US interests such as capitulating to [Saudi demands](#) for massive advanced arms sales, significant new US security commitments and even the facilitation of a Saudi nuclear enrichment program [not subject to key nonproliferation safeguards](#). While enhanced coordination in certain areas like missile detection and maritime security can be beneficial in enhancing stability and protecting US interests, fulfilling Saudi Arabia's military and nuclear wish list could draw the United States even deeper into the ever-changing regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as [seriously undermine Israel's security](#).

Ironically, caution in tying ourselves militarily to Saudi Arabia has proven especially warranted following its re-normalization agreement with Iran, which has shown Riyadh's own strategic positioning to be much more flexible than those arguing for formal US-Saudi military commitments had realized. Predictably, their reaction to the Saudi-Iran accord finalized under China's auspices has been to redouble their [prescription](#) for the United States to fulfill Riyadh's demands for arms and NATO-esque security guarantees. Referencing the Saudi-Iran deal and other developments in the context of arguing for a new "grand strategy" involving record new military spending to counter Russia and China, arch-neoconservative John Bolton [wrote](#), "We must address the unease our Middle East friends feel about American resolve and, consistent with longstanding U.S. policy, exclude Moscow from regional influence, along with Beijing."

In addition to it being ["folly"](#) to believe that Saudi Arabia would actually forgo the benefits and leverage it derives from its relationship with China, this militarist approach is diametrically opposed to American voters' reticence to send their tax dollars and loved ones in uniform into another Middle East quagmire. It also runs counter to the [vision](#) put forward by Jake Sullivan and Daniel Benaim — now National Security Advisor and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs, respectively — eight months before the Biden Administration took office. Sullivan and Benaim envisioned regionally-focused diplomacy that "creates space to address regional challenges over time... that will ultimately allow for sustained reductions in its military presence, while safeguarding important interests in a region that still matters for the United States for years to come." The regional reshuffling reflected in the Saudi-Iran deal and other recent dialogue between Iran and Gulf countries, along with the Abraham Accords, presents a perfect opportunity to explore such diplomacy, rather than a military build-up.

Lastly, as it seeks to facilitate Israeli-Arab normalization and regional integration, the United States must not let up on — and in fact should intensify — pressing its concerns with both Saudi Arabia and Israel on democracy and human rights. This is especially necessary and appropriate in the context of a Saudi autocracy that holds itself out as seeking a more open society, but which continues grave human rights abuses, including avoiding meaningful accountability for the murder of US-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It is true as well regarding Israel, where a far right government not only continues to violate human rights in Palestinian territory, but is now attempting to bring some of the occupation's illiberal features — like detention without charge — home to Israel.