

Biden steamrolls toward disaster in the Middle East

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President Joe Biden is reportedly considering going where no past U.S. president dared go: signing a mutual security pact with Saudi Arabia in return for Riyadh normalizing relations with Israel. White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Biden's top Middle East advisor Brett McGurk, and senior advisor Amos Hochstein are purportedly in Saudi Arabia to discuss a potential deal.

Such a move would be disastrous for American interests, entrapping Washington as Riyadh's security guarantor despite a fundamental disconnect between U.S. and Saudi interests and values. This agreement would risk American lives to defend a repressive dictatorship and provide a framework for other regional dictators to pressure the United States into similar concessions. The Biden administration appears to be pursuing this agreement unilaterally, leaving both Congress and the American people in the dark.

The United States already has a deep — but strategically and morally objectionable — security relationship with Saudi Arabia. Today, U.S. and Saudi interests do not align; Riyadh represents a strategic liability, not a strategic partner. Indeed, Saudi Arabia actively undermines both U.S. interests and values. No number of concessions to Riyadh will change this. Instead, unwavering U.S. support emboldens Saudi Arabia's repressive and aggressive behavior by offering the assurance that the United States will come to their aid and not hold them responsible.

Despite these disconnects, U.S. policy has yet to adjust course.

Advancing the series of normalization agreements between Israel and various Arab states — popularly referred to as the “Abraham Accords” — has rapidly emerged as a new framework for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and a new rationale for doubling-down on the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The Biden administration — which has prioritized brokering Saudi-Israel normalization as a cornerstone of its Middle East policy — has argued the United States has a “national security interest” in brokering formal diplomatic relations between them. A flurry of reports this year

have indicated that the Biden administration is pushing for Israel-Saudi normalization by the end of 2023. Biden centered his dual visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in 2022 on this issue. In return for normalization with Israel, Saudi Arabia is pressing the Biden administration for more formalized security commitments, as well as help with developing their civilian nuclear program.

The Biden administration is wrong to consider such a tradeoff. There is no strategic incentive for the United States to grant policy concessions and/or increase security commitments to Saudi Arabia for formally normalizing relations with Israel.

Saudi Arabia hopes to pressure the United States into providing policy concessions and increased security commitments in return for formally normalizing relations with a country with which they are, for the most part, already strategically aligned. This is part of a deliberate strategy by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to exploit growing fears in Washington that the United States is losing influence in the Middle East, particularly as other actors such as China are expanding their own regional presence.

Instead of advancing U.S. interests, a deal that increases U.S. security commitments to Saudi Arabia in exchange for normalizing relations with Israel would further solidify U.S. support for the underlying sources of regional instability within the Middle East. Washington must not pay the costs of normalization and sacrifice our own interests in the process.

The Biden administration is right about one thing: It is past time for an official reevaluation of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Unfortunately, they are going about it all wrong. It is imperative to recognize the fundamental disconnect between U.S. and Saudi interests and values and avoid deepening ties with a repressive autocracy.

Outside of the executive branch, the only body that can conduct this reevaluation is Congress. By pursuing this mutual security pact unilaterally, Biden is bypassing the already limited congressional authority over foreign policy. Worse, if the security agreement is reached, then the legislature's ability to divest from this treaty is, at best, unclear, for it has never been successful in doing so.

Thus, if Congress wants to stop this formal security agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United States, they will need to act with haste in hopes of changing the Biden administration's views on an agreement with Saudi Arabia.

When it comes to U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia, less is more. Riyadh is not an ally.

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