



## The US will not gain from Israel-Saudi normalization

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Speaking at a conference hosted by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee on June 5, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated the Biden administration is committed to brokering formal diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi, arguing that “the United States has a real national security interest in promoting normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia...We believe we can and indeed we must play an integral role in advancing it.”

Blinken is wrong. The U.S. has little to gain and may incur large costs by trying to broker an Israel-Saudi normalization.

Blinken’s statement followed a visit by White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to Saudi Arabia last week to discuss the issue with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). There are reports the Biden administration is allegedly pushing for Israel-Saudi normalization by the end of 2023 before entering into a contentious election year. 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 — namely the ability to independently enrich uranium.

These rumors of possible Israel-Saudi normalization are not new, nor are efforts by the Israeli government and the Biden administration to try and bring Saudi Arabia into the fold of the so-called “Abraham Accords” — the series of diplomatic agreements signed under the Trump administration that involved the formal normalization of relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain (and were later expanded to include Morocco and Sudan). The Biden administration has repeatedly expressed its desire to expand upon the Abraham Accords, and Israeli public opinion polls demonstrate Saudi Arabia remains by far the most important Arab country with which they desire to normalize relations. President Biden himself centered his dual visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in 2022 on this issue.

The Biden administration has things backward here.

There is no strategic incentive for the U.S. to grant policy concessions and/or increase security commitments to Saudi Arabia for formally normalizing relations with Israel. Informal Israel-Saudi ties have grown considerably over the past two decades. The strategic interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel have increasingly converged, especially following the Arab uprisings and growing shared fears over preserving regional status quo.

The shared strategic interests of political elites within these countries has ushered in dramatic new levels of cooperation, under the aegis of what has been referred to as “implicit normalization.”

Saudi Arabia does not require an incentive to formally normalize relations with Israel. Though Israel and Saudi Arabia do not formally maintain diplomatic relations, this has not prevented the two from working together towards shared strategic objectives. It has been in their own strategic interest to do so.

In that case, though, Saudi Arabia seeks to pressure the U.S. into providing policy concessions and increased security commitments for Riyadh in return for formally normalizing relations with a country with which they are already strategically aligned. This is part of a deliberate strategy by Saudi Crown Prince MbS to exploit growing fears in Washington that the U.S. is losing influence in the Middle East, particularly as other actors such as China are expanding their own regional presence.

This is despite the fact Saudi Arabia continues to pursue policies that are in direct conflict with the interests (and values) of the U.S. Such reckless caving to Saudi demands would likely embolden Riyadh’s repressive and aggressive domestic and foreign policies, particularly as the country is currently taking a hard turn toward an overt form of hypernationalism. MbS hopes to hold out for as many concessions possible, knowing that officials in Washington are desperate to chalk up perceived wins in the region.

Instead of advancing U.S. interests, though, such increased security commitments to Saudi Arabia for normalizing relations with Israel would further solidify U.S. support for the underlying sources of regional instability within the Middle East. As I have argued elsewhere, the Abraham Accords represent the formalization of a coercive political, economic, and security order designed to maintain the status quo in the region.

The Accords are a top-down mechanism designed to advance the interests of regional political elites and, presumably, the United States. Previous normalizations between Israel and other Arab states have been rooted in advancing the shared interests of political elites within these countries, all of whom were granted considerable policy concessions for joining the Abraham Accords without any serious debate as to whether such tradeoffs are in the interests of the U.S.

The Abraham Accords framework has rapidly emerged as the new framework for U.S. policy in the Middle East. However, as the Saudi case demonstrates, Washington must not pay the costs of normalization and sacrifice our own interests in the process. The U.S. must fundamentally reassess its strategic interests within the Middle East and reorient its regional policies toward objectives that advance the interests of the American people.

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