

# President Biden's Middle East Squeeze Play

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Managing Director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**The end of the Gaza war's current phase will mark the beginning of a major U.S. diplomatic push that could reshape the Middle East if successful—but the window of opportunity is narrow.**

**W**hen the Gaza war broke out last year, it quickly became a major impediment to what had been an ambitious and positive U.S. policy agenda in the Middle East. Building on the Trump administration's Abraham Accords, the Biden administration hoped to midwife Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia, accompanied by a landmark U.S. defense treaty and civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the kingdom. This agenda was not solely or even primarily about bolstering Israel's place in the region, but rather about dealing a strategic blow to the Iran-led "resistance" axis and strengthening Washington's network of regional partners amid mounting great power competition globally.

The war has not necessarily derailed this agenda—the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have all signaled their continued interest in moving forward with it. Yet the window of opportunity is tight. Riyadh believes it needs a Democratic president to get a treaty approved in Congress, so its perceived deadline is late this summer given the uncertainties of the U.S. election cycle. Realistically, however, none of the parties can begin the final diplomacy needed to conclude these agreements until major combat subsides in Gaza. Under these constraints, the Biden administration would need to quickly nail down the details of not one but four major agreements: on Israeli-Saudi normalization, U.S.-Saudi defense ties, U.S.-Saudi civil nuclear cooperation, and the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations. And it would need to do so in a way that avoids triggering a veto from Jerusalem, Riyadh, or the U.S. Congress.

## Prerequisites for Each Agreement

**T**he agreements that Washington sought to conclude before the war would have represented the boldest step forward in Arab-Israeli peace since the 1978 Camp David Accords, overturning the idea that full Arab recognition

could only follow Israeli-Palestinian peace. Saudi normalization would likely have led Qatar, other Arab states, and perhaps even Muslim-majority states outside the region to quickly reach their own accords with Israel. The accompanying U.S.-Saudi defense treaty held the promise of formalizing Riyadh's place as an American partner and distancing it from China, whose ambitions in the Middle East have been growing. The Saudis had also concluded that a defense treaty and civil nuclear agreement would deter Iran from attacking them or finalizing its push for a nuclear weapon, either of which could destabilize the region and deal a severe blow to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's transformative domestic agenda.

Yet each of these three agreements is complicated enough on its own, let alone in tandem. A defense treaty would likely center on a mutual defense provision modeled after Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan **Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security** (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>). Although that clause does not bind either party to act, it does acknowledge the need to address common security threats: "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes." In addition to such language, Saudi Arabia likely seeks priority access to advanced U.S. defense systems, while Washington requires limitations on Riyadh's dealings with China, Russia, and other powers regarding military matters, dual-use technology, and related issues.

Ratifying such an agreement would face long odds even in the best of circumstances. The last time the United States concluded a mutual defense treaty was with Japan in 1960. Moreover, Senate ratification requires sixty-seven votes and would presumably face opposition on multiple fronts—from senators of an isolationist bent on both sides of the aisle, and from (mostly Democratic) senators who are critical of Saudi Arabia's record on human rights and foreign policy. It is this prospective opposition that has spurred Riyadh's urgency—securing enough Democratic votes, the thinking goes, **requires a Democratic president** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-trip-report-middle-east-study-tour>) to engage in political arm-twisting. A Republican president might be more supportive but less able to secure the needed votes on the left, even in a Republican-majority Senate.

The two other pieces of this diplomatic trifecta are quite complicated as well. Technically, a U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation accord (known as a "123 Agreement" in U.S. parlance) does not require congressional approval to enter into force. Yet it can be blocked if Congress issues a joint resolution of disapproval—a scenario that cannot be ruled out if the accord includes controversial provisions such as allowing the Saudis to enrich uranium inside their borders. As for Israeli-Saudi normalization—widely seen as the U.S. price for the other two agreements—its enormous diplomatic benefits could be diluted in the near term if the process is incremental (e.g., starting with the exchange of ambassadors before proceeding to regularized economic or tourist arrangements). As complex as these other two agreements are, however, the defense treaty—and, by extension, the U.S. political calendar—are viewed as the pacing challenges.

## Impact of the Gaza War

**W**hether by design or unhappy accident, Hamas's October 7 attack interrupted this diplomatic agenda. Yet all three parties are still keen to return to the negotiating table, and with an added incentive—moving ahead with Israeli-Saudi normalization now would deny Iran and its cronies a chance to claim a strategic victory out of Hamas's heinous attack. This is important not only to Washington and Jerusalem, but also to Western-leaning capitals throughout the Arab world. Despite their support for the Palestinian cause, **most regional leaders are wary** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-middle-east-observations-regional-tour>) of the Islamism represented by Hamas and remain convinced that Tehran and its proxies represent a grave threat.

Prior to October 7, it was widely believed that Saudi Arabia would insist on a Palestinian component to normalization, but one that fell **far short of immediate statehood** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy->

**analysis/peace-saudi-arabia-transformative-requires-choices**) or even renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. After Israel's military campaign in Gaza, however, that has changed significantly. Wary of domestic and regional public opinion, Riyadh has begun to demand "time-bound, irreversible" steps toward Palestinian statehood, insisting that it will not be content with business as usual on the peace process.

For example, Arab leaders seem adamant that the United States recognize Palestinian statehood unilaterally at the outset of any peace push, without waiting for Israeli concurrence. This demand is often framed as a reflection of Arab impatience with past negotiations that have proven time-consuming and ultimately fruitless. More likely, however, it reflects Riyadh's desire to get its negotiations with the United States back on track. Saudi policymakers seem to fear that Arab public opinion will not brook a normalization agreement without major concessions on Palestinian statehood. They also seem to believe that neither Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu nor any of his likely successors would agree to such concessions in the near future, since Israeli public opinion would presumably regard them as a reward for the atrocities of October 7. Moreover, despite their mutual desire for an Israeli government that is willing to pursue a peace process, neither Riyadh nor Washington is eager for Netanyahu's ouster, since that would trigger an election and take the parties past the perceived deadlines for concluding normalization and a defense treaty. Riyadh therefore sees unilateral U.S. recognition of Palestinian statehood as an elegant solution to this dilemma—a major step that would not require Israeli acquiescence.

Yet unilateral recognition is both a political nonstarter in the United States and an unwise policy step. Declaring a Palestinian state without agreements on its borders, capital, or security relations with Israel could worsen the already dire situation between the two parties and set the stage for deeper conflict. In Israel's view, the outcome of its decisions to withdraw from south Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 demonstrate the futility of simply declaring a problem solved without negotiating arrangements to keep the peace.

## Next Steps for U.S. Policy

**D**espite these obstacles and limitations, the United States has every reason to keep moving ahead with its pre-October 7 diplomatic agenda. Indeed, to the extent October 7 represented an effort by the Iranian axis to obstruct this agenda, Washington now has even greater reason to pursue it. Although the Gaza crisis has complicated the situation, Arab normalization with Israel can still help promote peace—in addition to formal arrangements on borders, security, and other matters, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also requires a narrative of coexistence to counter Hamas's narrative of grievance and revanchism. The Abraham Accords were a good first step toward these goals, and Israeli-Saudi normalization would powerfully extend the narrative.

Of course, accomplishing this will require hard choices from all parties. The United States and Israel may need to accept that Saudi normalization will proceed in phases rather than in one fell swoop like the Abraham Accords. Riyadh and other Arab capitals need to accept that Washington will not recognize Palestinian statehood prematurely, but only after **much work is done** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/road-peace-gaza-veteran-negotiators-plan>) on security, governance, education, and economic issues. And all parties must accept that no matter how diligently they work toward compromise, their ambitious agenda may simply not conform to the U.S. political calendar.

Although deferring these agreements would be unfortunate, it would not be tragic—the growing closeness between Arab states and Israel is unlikely to be overturned by any particular diplomatic initiative or military conflict, even one as harrowing as the Gaza war. Rather, it represents the culmination of a decades-long tectonic shift, with Israeli and Arab threat perceptions converging even as great power competition has returned to the region and American attention has shifted away. For two decades now, the United States has embarked on a string of impatient Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts that have collectively set the process back. What is needed today is patience.

*Michael Singh is the managing director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, and former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ♦*

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