

Netanyahu's Saudi Arabia Bind

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COMMENTARY



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aspires to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords. However, he finds himself in a bind: The actions he must take to normalize relations with Riyadh conflict with the arrangements and concessions necessary to preserve his hard right-wing coalition government.

According to a [statement](#) issued by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs following a mid-January meeting in Jerusalem, Netanyahu and Biden administration National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan "discussed the next steps to deepen the Abraham Accords and expand the circle of peace, with emphasis on a breakthrough regarding Saudi Arabia." In a Feb. 1 [interview](#) with CNN's Jake Tapper, Netanyahu went further. "If we make peace with Saudi Arabia – it depends on the Saudi leadership – and bring, effectively, the Arab-Israeli conflict to an end," he said, "I think we'll circle back to the Palestinians and get a workable peace with the Palestinians."

Upgrading relations is also on the Saudi agenda, but with caveats. At Davos in January, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud stated that improving ties with Israel depends on progress in establishing a Palestinian state. “Palestine remains an incredibly important, evocative issue in our region,” said the Saudi foreign minister. “It remains incredibly consequential and remains unresolved. And the focus really needs to be on a pathway to resolving this conflict, and that’s only going to happen with negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, in the spirit of reaching real agreements and reaching in the end, we believe, a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

Bin Farhan al Saud acknowledged that Israel is “sending some signals that maybe are not conducive” to formal negotiations and enduring agreements. At the same time, he hoped that “in the end” the Israelis understand “it is in their interest and not just their interest but the wider region that they engage seriously on resolving the Palestinian conflict, because if we resolve that conflict, if we are able to find a resolution that gives the Palestinians dignity,” then “that removes a huge drag on the entire region, a source of potential conflict that is always going to be there if not resolved.”

The Saudi foreign minister’s forward-looking remarks leave room for securing normalization without fully resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To take advantage of the opening, Israel will need to demonstrate progress in creating conditions for extending Palestinian self-government. In the CNN interview, Netanyahu sketched an approach that might fit the bill. He envisaged a “formula for peace” in which West Bank Palestinians possess “all the powers that they need to govern themselves but none of the powers that can threaten us [Israel].” In other words, Israel would retain “overriding security responsibility” for the land – both that governed by Israel and that governed by the Palestinian Authority – that lies west of the Jordan River.

Two sets of concrete interests impel Israel and Saudi Arabia to pursue normalization. The first stems from shared national security concerns. In the face of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s quest for hegemony in the Middle East, both Riyadh and Jerusalem would benefit from enhanced defense cooperation. The second is a matter of economic development and commerce. Under the leadership of Mohammad bin Salman, the kingdom has undertaken massive modernization projects for which Israel is well placed to provide high-tech know how and sophisticated internal security assistance.

Netanyahu, moreover, has a private interest in striking a deal with Saudi Arabia. Having doubled the number of Arab countries with normal diplomatic relations with Israel by signing the historic Abraham Accords with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in September 2020, the country’s longest-serving prime minister would cement his legacy as Israel’s preeminent statesman by presiding over the exchange of ambassadors with Riyadh.

Netanyahu, however, faces a daunting challenge. In a searing essay in the Jewish Review of Books, the American-born author Hillel Halkin, who has lived in Israel since 1970 and who has long been associated with the conservative Zionism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, gives reasons to doubt that the prime minister can meet the Saudis' publicly expressed preconditions for normalization. The principal impediment is that Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox and religious nationalist coalition partners are disposed to stall serious efforts to expand Palestinian self-rule.

Since Netanyahu returned to the prime minister's office in 2009, "Not solving things but 'managing' them became the slogan of the Netanyahu governments – and the Center-Left opposition, having run out of ideas of its own, went along," observes Halkin. "The Palestinian problem, until then at the heart of Israeli political debate, was shunted aside. Nothing had worked, ergo, nothing could work; why waste time discussing it? What couldn't be solved could be lived with."

Although Israel has prospered economically over the last 14 years and notwithstanding persistent Palestinian intransigence and militancy, Halkin argues, the Palestinian problem cannot be postponed indefinitely. What he calls the "standard formulation" of Israel's excruciating dilemma remains as true as when it emerged in the aftermath of Israel's great victory in the Six Day War. "Unless Israel relinquished control of most of the territories acquired in 1967 along with their millions of Arab inhabitants," Halkin writes, "it would eventually have to either grant these inhabitants citizenship and cease to be a Jewish state or continue to deny it and cease to be a democratic state: a binational Israel that would inevitably implode from within or a morally repugnant Israel ostracized by the world and deserted by many of its own citizens – such would be the only, the intolerable, choice if Israel failed to extricate itself from the Palestinian quicksand."

Netanyahu grasps the issue. In the absence of negotiations that stood a chance of settling the conflict, he pursued in 2009 an "economic peace" that promoted Palestinian prosperity.

In the short term, however, additional steps to ease the conflict are unlikely because of the composition of Netanyahu's 64-seat governing coalition in Israel's 120-member Knesset. In addition to his Likud party, which won 32 seats, the coalition includes two ultra-Orthodox parties, which together hold 18 seats, and a religious nationalist collection of parties that controls 14 seats. These partners, according to Halkin, are at best indifferent to easing the conflict.

The ultra-Orthodox parties tend to look inward. They focus on preserving their community's exemptions from military service; maintaining enormous state subsidies to their religious schools, which disdain to teach core subjects like English and mathematics; keeping a large segment of the adult male population out of the workforce and engaged in full-time Torah study; and extending Jewish law's reach in public life.

Meanwhile, the religious nationalists make a priority of securing Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, the biblical names for the territories also referred to as the West Bank. Bezalel Smotrich leads the religious nationalists. Under an unusual agreement with Netanyahu, Smotrich serves not only as finance minister but also as a minister in the ministry of defense. After the right's November election victory, Smotrich tweeted, according to Halkin, "With God's help, we in the incoming government will accelerate Israeli settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel."

The appeal to God as a political ally dismays Halkin. He stresses that he has long supported Israelis living in Judea and Samaria because "these were part of my people's heritage." But as a Zionist in the mold of Jabotinsky and Begin, he rejects reliance on God for the hard work of building a Jewish state that is free and democratic. Convinced that the Palestinians, too, have a legitimate claim on the disputed territories, Halkin writes, "I do not pretend to know whose side God is on, or whether he takes sides at all in such matters, or whether he still would be God if he did." Halkin's fear is that instead of shouldering responsibility to ease the conflict, Smotrich, along with the religious nationalists he leads and the ultra-Orthodox, have put their faith in God to handle matters on behalf of the Jewish people in His way and on His schedule.

Optimists argue that Smotrich and allies will grow in office and credit Netanyahu's insistence that he can control the religious-nationalist as well as the ultra-Orthodox members of his coalition. Netanyahu's legion of critics in the center and on the left contends that the prime minister – imperiled by a criminal trial on charges of fraud, bribery, and breach of trust and embroiled in controversy over major reform of the judiciary – is too dependent on his coalition partners to rein them in.

One thing is for sure. Maintaining his coalition while drawing Saudi Arabia into normalization talks by taking constructive measures to promote Palestinian prosperity and self-government will require of Netanyahu political wizardry and statesmanship of an exceptionally high order.

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