

Saudi-Israel Normalisation: The Grand Illusion

There will be no peace between Israel and any Arab nation until the Palestinian conflict is resolved through shared sovereignty over the land

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"Generally speaking, the region's about as stable as it has been in many years," a senior [US](#) administration official told [the Washington Post](#) before US President Joe Biden addressed the United Nations General Assembly last week.

Five countries lie in ruins, four of them as a consequence of US intervention; and three more, whose rulers are backed by Washington, teeter on the verge of bankruptcy.

"I believe a lot of that is due to some pretty smart – often backroom – US diplomacy," the senior official continued without a hint of irony.

Pride of place in the US diplomatic trophy cabinet is now being given to Biden's efforts to get [Saudi Arabia](#) to recognise [Israel](#).

Having been a noted sceptic when the process was being handled by former US President Donald [Trump](#) and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, Secretary of State Antony Blinken now speaks about it with the zeal of a convert.

He has [said](#) that normalisation between two of Washington's closest Middle East allies would be "a transformative event", while National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has [noted](#) that the parties involved have a "broad understanding of many of the key elements".

The latest piece of an increasingly complicated jigsaw puzzle is the Saudi agreement to [nuclear oversight](#) by the UN atomic watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency. US help with nuclear enrichment is one item on a growing shopping list of Saudi demands.

Before that, there was talk of a US security pact. But Saudi Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Salman](#) continues to dangle the trinket of his signature without sacrificing his relationship with [China](#).

Anointing Western Leaders

In his latest interview with Fox News, Mohammed bin Salman denied that talks had been suspended over Israel's extreme right-wing government: "Every day [we get closer](#) [to a deal]. It seems for the first time a real one, serious."

Nor would he be dissuaded from supporting [Russia](#) in Opec+, [saying](#) it's all about "supply and demand", and China, whose leader, President Xi Jinping, is "trying to do the best" [for his country](#).

Arab [normalisation](#) with Israel means radically different things to different parties. For a US that is having considerable trouble withdrawing from the region after two decades of botched interventions, the gains of such a pact are geo-strategic.

It's about anointing the new western leaders of the region. It's about shutting China and Russia out of the Gulf, as anything other than trading partners.

Former US President Barack Obama's pivot to the Pacific, and Trump's "[deal of the century](#)", have become fused into one. All three presidents have torn up the search for a solution to the [Palestinian](#) conflict.

For the rich Gulf states, it's all about playing the market, getting the highest price from the highest bidder.

Saudi Arabia, the [United Arab Emirates](#) and [Qatar](#) have all gone through the same traumas as nations that were once dependent on western finance, technology and military support. [Iran](#), Russia and [Turkey](#) have all travelled the same journey. They are roughly in the same place on US power projection in the 21st century, although their outward statements and alliances may differ.

Once believers in the western dream as the motor for development, they are now profoundly disillusioned and determined to fashion their own futures with their own alliances.

Rebranding the Saudi Crown Prince

Anyone who thinks that Saudi Arabia will be cemented into the western camp as a result of recognising Israel is living in Cloud Cuckoo Land. What Riyadh is doing is spreading its bets – which, in the circumstances, is sensible.

Even in personal terms – and policy set by an absolute ruler is exclusively personal – Mohammed bin Salman is closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin than he is to most others on the world stage.

Both started as rank outsiders in their respective systems. They were dismissed by their peers, underestimated by their enemies, and found their way to the top with maximum ruthlessness. Putin showed Mohammed bin Salman [the way](#) when it came to assassinating [expats abroad](#).

That is why the attempt to rebrand Mohammed bin Salman as a visionary reformer verges on black comedy, if it weren't so offensive to bereaved Saudi families.

Five years after the murder of Jamal [Khashoggi](#), which was ordered by the Saudi crown prince using a team of assassins handpicked for the job, western investors are back at [Davos in the Desert](#), drooling over potential pickings.

For Israel, normalisation with its Arab neighbours is about sealing its place as the dominant military and hi-tech power in the region. It has never been about parity, the search for an equal partnership with its Arab neighbours – or even about a European colony coming to terms with the fact that it is in the Middle East. However many agreements are signed, Israel will always insist on military superiority in conventional and nuclear arms.

Declaring Victory for Zionism

For the current ultranationalist leadership of Israel, there is also a strong internal ideological component at play, which has little to do with deconfliction, let alone peace.

Normalisation with Saudi Arabia is all about declaring the victory of the Zionist project. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose words are rarely to be ignored, said as much at the UN General Assembly. Palestinians cannot have a veto over peace, he said.

“I believe that we are at the cusp of an even more dramatic breakthrough – an historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such a peace will go a long way to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict,” Netanyahu [said](#). “It will encourage other Arab states to normalise their relations with Israel. It will enhance the prospects of peace with the Palestinians. It will encourage a broader reconciliation between Judaism and Islam, between Jerusalem and Mecca, between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael. All these are tremendous blessings.”

Parading another of his infamously deceptive maps, which obliterated Palestinian lands, Netanyahu declared victory.

He and Israel are under a grand illusion.

A new beginning has been declared many times before. When former [Egyptian](#) President Anwar Sadat met former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the latter [pledged](#) “no more war, no more bloodshed, no more attacks”. That meeting took place in 1977.

A year later, Israel invaded southern [Lebanon](#) up to the Litani River, and it did so again in 1982 to expel the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The same false promises were made at [Oslo](#) in 1993, with documents signed on [the same wooden table](#) used for the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. The New York Times said [at the time](#) that Oslo would “eventually allow Palestinians to run their own affairs as Israeli troops pull back within months from the Gaza Strip and Jericho in a first step”.

Peace in Our Time?

The peace treaties with Egypt and [Jordan](#) were dotted with hosts of clandestine meetings between Arab and Israeli leaders, just as Mohammed bin Salman and Netanyahu [have met secretly](#).

Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and his defence minister, Yitzhak Rabin, met

King Hussein of Jordan on the [outskirts of Aqaba](#) in the dead of night in 1986. Hussein, it is now known, visited Israel clandestinely [three times](#), bringing gifts like gold pens topped with the symbol of the Hashemite crown. Cabinet member Yigal Allon even received a German assault rifle. Hussein and Rabin enjoyed [a smoke together](#).

All touching details, but none of them have changed the course of history. Indeed, they emboldened Israel to continue and deepen its [occupation](#), and blast its neighbours at the first sign of trouble.

Has public opinion changed about Israel among Jordanians and Egyptians as a result of these treaties? If anything, Israel is as hated now as it ever was. Uppermost in any Arab mind is Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people.

Three decades after Jordan's peace treaty, Israel's defence minister, Yoav Gallant, announced that Israel would [build a new barrier](#) along the 300km border with Jordan. Young Jordanians are routinely refused visas to cross it. There is no peace between the two nations.

The Ukrainian Jewish leader of the Revisionist Zionists, [Vladimir Jabotinsky](#), saw and said this very clearly. He wrote:

"To imagine, as our Arabophiles do, that [the Palestinians] will voluntarily consent to the realisation of Zionism, in return for the moral and material conveniences which the Jewish colonist brings with him, is a childish notion, which has at bottom a kind of contempt for the Arab people; it means that they despise the Arab race, which they regard as a corrupt mob that can be bought and sold, and are willing to give up their fatherland for a good railway system ... There is no justification for such a belief.

"It may be that some individual Arabs take bribes. But that does not mean that the Arab people of Palestine as a whole will sell that fervent patriotism that they guard so jealously, and which even the Papuans will never sell. Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonised."

Arab leaders have enjoyed warm relations with their Israeli counterparts for decades, some even before the creation of Israel itself. The claim that Israel is surrounded by Arab regimes who represent an existential threat was an illusion debunked by the work of [the New Historians](#) on 1948 and every war since.

Israel had highly placed spies in the centres of power in Arab regimes; from [Eli Cohen](#) in Syria to [Ashraf Marwan](#) in Egypt. Marwan was the son-in-law of Gamal Abdul Nasser and a close aide to Anwar Sadat.

Israel's problem has always been with the Palestinians living in historic Palestine and the diaspora, who see Israel as a colonial apartheid regime. No signature of any new treaty will change that.

There will be no peace between any Arab nation and Israel until the Palestinian conflict is ended by Israel agreeing to share sovereignty over the land. And the next time an Israeli leader declares "peace in our time", I would advise everyone in the vicinity of its warplanes and drones to dive for cover.

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