

Opinion Don't expect a Saudi-Israel deal soon, or maybe ever



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Don't believe everything you read, especially about the Middle East. Last week, a breathless report in the [Wall Street Journal](#) suggested that the "U.S. and Saudi Arabia have agreed on the broad contours of a deal for Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel in exchange for concessions to the Palestinians, U.S. security guarantees and civilian nuclear help."

Umm, not really. Not even close.

Talks have been going on for some time between the United States and each party regarding hopes for some kind of deal that would build on progress made between Israel and other Arab states in the [Abraham Accords](#). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, long fancying himself as his country's greatest diplomat, would like nothing better than a deal with the Saudis to seal his legacy. He also would dearly love to distract from the social, political and [economic catastrophe](#) his coalition government provoked in its quest to bring the judiciary to heel.

That does not mean a deal is in the offing — or even likely. At a State Department briefing on Wednesday, spokesman [Matthew Miller](#) [threw cold water](#) on the Journal story. "I will say that we've had productive conversations," Miller said. "There is a number of issues that we have discussed, both with the Israeli government and with the Saudi government. Those conversations continue. I expect there will be more happening in coming weeks." He said that "it is still a long road to go with an uncertain future."

Even more bluntly, [National Security Council spokesman John Kirby](#) [cautioned](#), "There is no agreed-to set of negotiations ... there's no agreed-to framework to codify normalization or any of the other security considerations that we and our friends have in the region." Kirby wouldn't even confirm a date for a Netanyahu visit to the United States. So, no, there's not an imminent agreement.



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In Israel, the "peace-in-our-time" report was greeted with guffaws. [Haaretz](#) reported, "U.S. and Saudi officials have more work ahead of them than less, and there are many devils in the details that still need to be hashed out — any number of which could prove fatal and derail the diplomatic push."

There is a fundamental problem with any such deal: Any deal with the Saudis would likely require something substantial for the Palestinians. However, the Israeli government's right-wing coalition, bent on annexation of the West Bank, includes figures such as finance minister Bezael Smotrich and national security minister Itamar Ben Gvir, who appear to be competing to see which can make the most radical and offensive remarks and policy proposals regarding the Palestinians. The notion that this government would give anything to the Palestinians beggars belief.

Moreover, if Saudis expect to get a NATO-like partnership with the United States (pledging to go to war if the Saudis are attacked), approval for a civilian nuclear program (the Saudis are less motivated by concerns about their carbon footprint than they are by competition with Iran) and even more U.S. high-tech weaponry, they might find out there is little appetite for any of that on either side of the congressional aisle in the United States. Next to China, Saudi Arabia holds the distinction as the country that generates the most bipartisan animosity because of the kingdom's atrocious human rights record and oil price gamesmanship. Senate ratification of a deal (likely to be too generous to the Palestinians for some senators and too stingy for others) would make the Iran nuclear agreement battle look like a walk in the park.

Certainly, the United States would like the Saudis to curtail technology and military deals with China. However, that's hardly sufficient for most U.S. politicians to justify the sort of agreement the Saudis have in mind.

And if that were all not enough to sink a deal, the perennial problem remains: With whom should the United States, Israel and the Saudis deal with on the Palestinian side? The corrupt, aging and ineffectual Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas has seemingly given up on his role in anti-terror cooperation, and he certainly can't speak for Hamas. (He has lived for decades in fear that any move toward Israel would lead to his political and personal demise.)

Lastly, the Saudis would be wary of making any deal with an Israeli government careening from one crisis to another, rushing headlong into a likely face-off with Israel's Supreme Court. A more centrist Israeli government might be willing to offer a more generous deal. *This* Israeli government could crumble if a deal were struck, leaving any agreement in shreds.

Indeed, the closer one looks at the potential for a significant agreement, the more fanciful it seems. A much more modest agreement might be possible, including aid for the Palestinians (conditioned on reforms and anti-corruption measures); a minimal diplomatic opening and enhanced commercial dealings between the Saudis and Israelis; and a tripartite regional defense alliance against Iran. But that probably would not satisfy Netanyahu's grandiose expectations.

Perhaps everyone should wait to see if Netanyahu, his coalition and Israeli democracy survive a collision with the Israeli Supreme Court this fall. If not, a deal with the Saudis will be very low on the priority list for any of the parties.