

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

# You Can't Normalize Relations With a Government That Isn't Normal

Sept. 5, 2023



By Thomas L. Friedman  
Opinion Columnist

**Sign up for Your Places: Global Update.** All the latest news for any part of the world you select. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The more I learn about the complex peace and security deal that the Biden team is trying to put together between the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Palestinians, the more I'm convinced that if they pull it off, they'll win both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize in Physics. Because finding a way to balance the different interests of all four of these parties makes quantum mechanics look as easy as tic-tac-toe.

But to make it simple for you, dear reader, given the many permutations this deal could take, let me just focus here on the only one that is in America's interest and that I would support.

It's a deal that would normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, forge a deeper security relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and concretely advance a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians — but does it all on terms that would almost certainly cause the breakup of the current Israeli ruling coalition, which is led by far-right Jewish supremacists the likes of which have never held national security powers in Israel before.

Alas, though, this is *not* the version that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel is trying to sell us. So, I want to appeal directly to President Biden and the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman: Do not let Netanyahu make you his useful idiots. You cannot have normalization with an Israeli government that is not normal. It will never be a stable U.S. ally or Saudi partner. And right now, *Israel's government is not normal.*

Consider just two data points: A former head of the Mossad, Tamir Pardo, recently warned that this Israeli coalition, no doubt assembled by Netanyahu to keep himself out of jail on corruption charges, includes “horrible racist parties.” How racist? “Someone took the Ku Klux Klan and brought it into the government,” Pardo said.

And then there's this: Last week Netanyahu's foreign minister, Eli Cohen, reportedly instructed Israel's ambassador to Romania, Reuven Azar, and a key settler leader, Yossi Dagan, to meet with the leader of a Romanian far-right party in Bucharest — a party Israel had long boycotted because of its history of antisemitic and Holocaust-denying statements.

Why? As the newspaper Haaretz explained, it's part of an effort that Dagan is behind “to promote ties between Israel and far-right European parties in order to convince them to support Israeli settlements in the West Bank.” Yes, Netanyahu and his allies are trying to build an alternative to the diplomatic support of America with xenophobic and extremist parties in Europe, who don't care about settlements.

You're shocked? It's understandable. The 75-year structure of U.S.-Israeli relations has been built around saving Israel from external Arab and Iranian threats. So it is hard for U.S. diplomats, the U.S. military, U.S. citizens and U.S. Jewish organizations to grasp that their role now is to save Israel from an internal Israeli Jewish threat, manifested by the government itself.

A lot of people are in denial on this, most notably AIPAC, the most powerful pro-Israel lobby, which continues to shill for Netanyahu in Washington and ignore Israel's democracy defenders. Haaretz recently described AIPAC as the “pro-Netanyahu, anti-Israel lobby” in Congress.

But they better wake up because four years of such an Israeli coalition in power and you can kiss goodbye the notion that Israel will ever again be a reliable U.S. ally.

And that brings us back to the Saudi deal. It was conceived to marry two components. The first is an upgraded U.S.-Saudi alliance, whereby the United States agrees to some kind of mutual defense treaty while the Saudis get to develop a civilian nuclear program and also get access to the most advanced U.S. weapons. In exchange, Saudi Arabia stays in America's corner and curbs military, technological and economic ties with China.

The second part of the deal was a normalization of relations between the Saudis and Israel, provided Israel made concessions to the Palestinians to keep alive the hope of a two-state deal.

I will address the Saudi-U.S. portion later, when all the details are known. But, as I said, when it comes to the Israeli-Saudi-Palestinian component, there are two possible permutations — one is in America’s interest and the other definitely is not.

The one that is definitely not in our interest is the one that Netanyahu will try to sweet talk the United States into. He is trying to pull off a four-corner shot — undermine the power of Israel’s Supreme Court to restrain his extreme government, while making himself a domestic hero by pulling off a peace deal with Saudi Arabia without having to give the Palestinians anything of significance, thereby advancing his coalition’s dream of annexing the West Bank — all while getting Saudi Arabia to pay for it and Joe Biden to bless it.

*That deal Biden and M.B.S. must reject out of hand.*

The deal they should insist on should stipulate that in return for normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Israel must freeze all settlement building in the West Bank in the areas earmarked for a Palestinian state, if it can one day be negotiated; not legalize any more illegal wildcat Israeli settlements; and, most important, insist that Israel transfer territory from Area C in the West Bank, as defined by the Oslo accords, to Areas B and A under more Palestinian control.

The United States and Saudi Arabia must also declare that the goal of the diplomatic process will be a two-state solution in the West Bank. That is what all previous U.S. presidents have committed to — and also what King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia insisted upon in his 2002 interview with me announcing the Saudi peace initiative, which later became the Arab Peace Initiative.

These requirements are vital because they are terms that the Jewish supremacists in Netanyahu’s cabinet could not swallow and that Bibi could not fudge. Thus, it would force Bibi’s government and the Israeli people to choose: Do you want annexation, or do you want normalization with the most important Muslim country — and the gateway to other big Muslim nations like Indonesia and Malaysia?

If we can get *that* choice on the table, it would almost certainly blow apart this Israeli coalition. Netanyahu’s far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, warned everyone just last week that “we will not make any concessions to the Palestinians” to secure a normalization deal with Saudi Arabia. “It’s a fiction,” he declared.

Smotrich added that while Israel was interested in the United States brokering an accord with the Saudis, “it has nothing to do with Judea and Samaria,” referring to the West Bank by its biblical names.

Just to remind: Since the 1936 British Peel Commission, the Zionist movement and Israel have accepted that the framework for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has to be two states for two people — through the U.N. partition plan of 1947, U.N. resolutions 242 and 338, Camp David, Oslo and finally the 2020 Abraham Accords. This Israeli commitment has been a key pillar of its alliance with America.

Netanyahu’s current coalition is the first Israeli government in eight decades that has — as part of its coalition agreement — set as a stated goal the Israeli annexation of the West Bank, or, as it puts it, “applying sovereignty in Judea and Samaria,” rejecting any partition.

America cannot let that happen. Netanyahu has been unilaterally changing tenets of our relationship and testing us. It’s time for the United States to test his government with a clear choice: annexation or normalization.

I make no predictions of what would happen if that explodes Netanyahu’s coalition. New Israeli elections? Or a national unity government, with the Israeli center-left and center-right working together to bring the country back to sanity?

For now, the only thing I’m certain of is what has to be stopped: This Israeli coalition has to be stopped. And, even more important, a bad deal — one that enables Netanyahu to crush the Israeli Supreme Court and win normalization from Saudi Arabia and pay such a small price to the Palestinians that the right-wing zealots in his cabinet can continue driving Israel over a cliff — absolutely has to be stopped.

That’s not a deal that Biden — one of America’s best foreign policy presidents ever — should want as part of his legacy, and it’s not a deal that would be a stable foundation for the Saudi-Israeli strategic partnership that M.B.S. seeks.

Just say no. To do otherwise would be shameful.

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here’s our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.*

Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist. He joined the paper in 1981, and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including “From Beirut to Jerusalem,” which won the National Book Award. [@tomfriedman](#) • [Facebook](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: The U.S. and the Saudis Should Say No to Netanyahu