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What Does the Biden-Netanyahu Meeting Mean for Saudi Normalization?

Unit for Political Studies

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On 20 September 2023, US President Joe Biden met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York alongside the UN General Assembly session as part of redoubled US diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, which Washington hopes will lead to a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement by the end of the year. The New York meeting marks the first between Biden and Netanyahu since the latter resumed Israeli premiership in late December 2022, at the head of a government considered the most radical in Israel's history. The meeting, long awaited by Netanyahu, was not held at the White House as he wished, but instead in New York and accompanied by a conditional invitation to visit Washington by the end of the year. According to a US government source, the New York meeting included a portion of time during which Biden and Netanyahu spoke one-on-one, without advisers present.¹

I. Controversy over the White House Invitation

The meeting comes in spite of recent tensions around the new Israeli government that have marred relations between Biden and Netanyahu, with the Biden administration announcing that it would not engage with the most radical members of Netanyahu's cabinet such as national security minister Itamar Ben Gvir and finance minister Bezalel Smotrich and that it holds the premier responsible for their actions.² And although there has also been controversy around Netanyahu's attempts to carry out judicial reforms that the Biden administration considers a threat to Israeli "democracy", Biden has nevertheless decided to suspend his reservations and meet with the premier, albeit not in Washington. US media sources report that Netanyahu's request to meet with Biden at the White House elicited mixed reactions from the president's advisers, who eventually agreed to hold the meeting at a Manhattan hotel once the UN General Assembly is in session.³

Those opposed to inviting Netanyahu to visit the White House argue that for the Biden administration to do so would be to back down from its demands that Netanyahu suspend his proposed reforms to the Israeli judiciary. Moreover, such a meeting will be seen as an endorsement of the Israeli government's radical settlement expansion policies and sponsorship of various settlement practices decried by Washington. There is also concern that inviting Netanyahu to the White House could incense the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, having already become sharply critical of Israel.⁴

Conversely, those in favour of the premier's White House visit believe that Biden ought to set aside his differences with Netanyahu on the threshold of a difficult upcoming electoral contest in 2024, lest he lose support among American supporters of Israel. They argue that the meeting could give Biden the opportunity to pressure the premier regarding the issue of judicial reform and American

1 Steve Holland, "Biden, Netanyahu Pledge to Work toward Israeli-Saudi Normalization," *Reuters*, 21/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PSN7rO>

2 Amy Teibel & Ethan Bronner, "US, Israel Clash over Policy that Sparked Democratic Protests," *Bloomberg*, 29/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Py8KfK>

3 Michael Collins & Maureen Groppe, "Biden, Bibi and Bette Midler: Here's what you need to know about United Nations General Assembly," *USA TODAY*, 20/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PBtOSh>

4 Bethan McKernan & Julian Borger, "Joe Biden to Meet Benjamin Netanyahu at UN in Awkward Rapprochement," *The Guardian*, 17/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45cCaWp>



efforts to normalize Saudi-Israel relations,⁵ where Netanyahu's cooperation becomes vital for the resumption of talks with the Palestinian Authority. Proponents of the visit argue that a late 2023 invitation – pending the Biden administration setting an official date for the visit – might serve as a pressure tool while the premier decides how to implement judicial reforms, the lengths to which he will go to conclude a deal with Saudi Arabia, and the scope of the potential “concessions” he could offer Palestinians.⁶

For his part, Netanyahu is taking great pains to encourage Biden to receive him in the White House and to publicly demonstrate his appreciation of the relationship with Washington following accusations by the Israeli opposition that he is undermining it.⁷ He also wants to remain informed about the progress of US-Saudi normalization negotiations and Washington's position on Riyadh's demand to obtain a peaceful nuclear reactor, conclude a joint defence treaty with the US, and approval to purchase advanced US weapons. Netanyahu also wants to remain close to Washington to influence the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear agreement instead of repeating his mistake in 2015, when he publicly opposed Washington's efforts and subsequently lost any opportunity to influence its policies. Netanyahu was further pushed in this direction when the White House succeeded in concluding an agreement with Tehran this month, with Qatari mediation, to exchange prisoners.

II. The New York Meeting Agenda

The bilateral discussions touched on several issues, including the judicial overhaul in Israel, the Iranian nuclear question, deepening investment and partnership in the Middle East, and the Palestinian-Israeli problem. But according to a statement issued by Netanyahu's office, his meeting with Biden primarily sought to discuss the prospects for US mediation to reach a “peace agreement” between Israel and Saudi Arabia. During the meeting, Biden clearly indicated that “establishing a more integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Middle East”, including plans to develop “the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel” is largely linked to reaching peace agreements between Israel and its neighbours in the region, specifically with Saudi Arabia.⁸ Netanyahu stressed the importance of US efforts in this area, saying: “we can forge a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and I think such a peace would go a long way, first, to advance the end of the Arab-Israel conflict, achieve reconciliation between the Islamic world and the Jewish state, and advance a genuine peace between Israel and the Palestinians.”⁹

On the same day, Fox News broadcast an interview with the Saudi Crown Prince, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in which he stated that “every day we get closer,” to normalization with Israel, and

5 Lazar Berman & Jacob Magid, “Netanyahu to Head to US after Rosh Hashanah on a Trip More Marginal than he'd Hoped,” *The Times of Israel*, 16/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/4666vXP>

6 McKernan.

7 Patrick Kingsley, “A Visit to the U.S. Revives an Embattled Netanyahu,” *The New York Times*, 22/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/48lrpHE>

8 “Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel,” *U.S. Embassy in Israel*, 20/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3RzUgyj>

9 “Full Text: Biden and Netanyahu's Public Remarks at their New York Meeting,” *The Times of Israel*, 20/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PUtjUJ>



that the Kingdom is engaged, through US mediation, in “serious” negotiations for the “first time”.¹⁰ Normalization is in fact creeping and gradual. This interview was followed by the first visit of an Israeli minister to Saudi Arabia, Minister of Tourism Haim Katz, who arrived in Riyadh on 26 September 2023, to take part in a conference organized by the World Tourism Organization, a United Nations affiliate.¹¹

Nonetheless, such an agreement, although “within reach,” as Netanyahu puts it, faces numerous obstacles. The Biden administration believes that Riyadh is dealing with the issue of full normalization with Israel as related, essentially, to US-Saudi understandings in the first place. This requires Washington to accept a set of Saudi demands: First, that the US agrees to help it build a civilian nuclear reactor that includes facilities that allow uranium enrichment on Saudi territory, under US supervision. Secondly, that Washington signs a joint defence treaty with Riyadh, similar to those with South Korea and Japan, under which the US commits to defending Saudi Arabia against any military threat. Third, that the Kingdom is allowed to purchase advanced US weapons, such as the anti-ballistic missile defence system.

Conversely, Saudi Arabia has not set any clear conditions on Israel as a price for normalization. Bin Salman has said that he wanted to see “a good life for the Palestinians,” resembling language used in Trump’s so-called “Deal of the Century”.¹² But the Saudi Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, indicated in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly that Riyadh expects any agreements in the region to include the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹³

These Saudi demands represent a major challenge to both the Biden administration and the Netanyahu government. The Biden administration seeks to contain Saudi Arabia’s fast development of relations with China and restrict its growing influence in the Middle East. It also needs Riyadh’s help in reducing oil prices before the US presidential elections next year.¹⁴ Biden hopes that a normalization deal of this size between Saudi Arabia and Israel will improve his electoral prospects and be recorded in his presidential legacy, despite no evidence to say voters are interested in such an agreement. In addition, completing a defence treaty between Washington and Riyadh requires the support of 67 members of the US Senate, while the Democratic Party has only 51 votes in the Senate, assuming they all stand with the president. Given the reservations many of them have regarding the Kingdom’s human rights record and the war in Yemen. Hence, this is unlikely. Biden will need support from the Republican Party, banking on Netanyahu’s help in this regard.

Moreover, the Biden administration seems to need to first convince Netanyahu to make “concessions” to the Palestinians to provide cover for the Saudi move. Some US estimates suggest that Riyadh may accept

¹⁰ Peter Aitken, “Bret Baier Interviews Saudi Prince: Israel Peace, 9 / 11 ties, Iran Nuke Fears: ‘Cannot see Another Hiroshima!’” *Fox News*, 20/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Zwzsk9>

¹¹ “The first visit of its kind...the Israeli Minister of Tourism arrives in Saudi Arabia,” *Al-Hurra*, 26/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/vNN6>

¹² Aitken.

¹³ “In UN speech, Saudi FM Urges Palestinian state, Doesn’t Mention Normalization, Israel,” *The Times of Israel*, 24/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3t8JUvg>

¹⁴ Tovah Lazaroff, “Why Netanyahu and Biden need each other for a Saudi deal,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 23/9/2023, accessed on 28/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/48v6WN6>



some “improvements” in the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank in exchange for normalization with Israel, such as granting them a greater degree of autonomy, transferring more powers and populated lands to the Palestinian Authority, curbing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, improved living and travel conditions for Palestinians, and preserving the foundations for a Palestinian state.¹⁵ But even if Netanyahu agrees to these “improvements,” members of his extremist government coalition who oppose the Palestinians obtaining any semblance of sovereignty are not expected to agree and fear that the civilian program sought by Saudi Arabia will turn into a military program, especially if it has Iran nuclear bomb.¹⁶ Although Netanyahu argues that he is able to persuade his government coalition to make concessions to the Palestinians in order to conclude a deal with Saudi Arabia, he refuses to specify the nature of these concessions, and even does not see a need for them, claiming that “no compromises would need to be made if the Palestinians would benefit from the peace deal in other ways.”¹⁷

Furthermore, imposing restrictions on settlement activity in the West Bank will meet opposition within the government coalition, forcing Netanyahu to request help from the opposition, specifically from Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid and former Defence Minister Benny Gantz, to form a national unity government. This is unlikely, not just because of Lapid and Gantz fraught relationship with Netanyahu, but because they also oppose Saudi Arabia having a nuclear program, peaceful or not.¹⁸ Although some believe that Netanyahu may resort to concluding a defence agreement with the US to gain the support of the opposition and form a unity government, it is difficult to envisage him obtaining the support of the opposition.¹⁹

Finally, it will be difficult for Saudi Arabia to justify its engagement in an open and formal normalization agreement with Israel without securing its three demands from the United States, partially or in full. The same applies, and perhaps to a lesser extent, to the concessions that Saudi Arabia wants Netanyahu to make to the Palestinians.

III. Conclusion

It is difficult to say whether the Biden administration will pull off a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel in time for the US presidential election season next spring. The combined demands of the former and reluctance of the latter could easily frustrate Biden’s attempts to obtain approval from Congress for any potential deal. However, the Biden administration is likely to continue trying given its connection to the core US interests and enduring influence in the region, especially with regard to containing China, evident in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor proposal.

¹⁵ Kingsley.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Maayan Jaffe-Hoffman, “Israel Weighing Palestinian Concessions for Saudi Peace, Netanyahu Says,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 23/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3rtZvoD>

¹⁸ Amir Tibon, “Opposition Leader Lapid: Israel Must Not Agree to Saudi Enrichment,” *Haaretz*, 21/9/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PyajKv>

¹⁹ Lazaroff.