Supporting a Saudi-US defense pact; rejecting nuclearization

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 25.10.2023

Mohammed bin Salman's statements on normalization with Israel attest to the seriousness of his efforts in this process and are also designed to prepare public opinion in the kingdom.

The three leaders – Joe Biden, bin Salman, and Netanyahu – have many reasons to try hard and reach a peace deal. The narrow window of opportunity for the three has had them explore the maneuvering room they have and find creative solutions in order to overcome the hurdles on the way: Saudi Arabia demands uranium enrichment capabilities, a defense pact, and real progress in the Palestinian track. Another issue that needs to be decided in Israel is a US-Israel defense pact. If the Israeli defense establishment becomes convinced that the pros outweigh the cons, then the current point in time presents an opportunity to reach such a deal as part of a grand bargain.

The laundry list that Saudi Arabia has sought to get from the US is long. Not only do some pose no real problems for Israel – but they also benefit it. Thus, Israel should not be opposed to a US-Saudi defense alliance. Jerusalem has a vested interest in bolstering the US commitment to its allies in the region, and therefore it should support such a development, even in public.

As for providing advanced US weapon systems to Saudi Arabia, Israel should condition its support on having Washington take steps to cement its qualitative edge. This could take the form of bolstering Israel's capabilities if the arms sold to Saudi Arabia are deemed to be chipping away at Israel's superiority. There is a big dilemma when it comes to Saudi Arabia's demand for US support in setting up a civilian nuclear program, which would include the ability to enrich uranium. You don't need to be a nuclear expert to understand what purpose this could serve. Having Riyadh join the nuclear club will expand nuclear proliferation in the region, with other countries racing to get enrichment capabilities on their territory.

As far as Israel is concerned, the ideal response from Biden would be along the lines of Saudi Arabia will not have nuclear enrichment, and neither will Iran.

Namely, rather than have Saudi Arabia try to keep up with Iran by getting enrichment capabilities, the US will act to bring an neutralize Iran's threatening capabilities. This response will not only make Saudi Arabia less concerned but will also prevent a nuclear arms race in the region and send a clear message as for the global standard that has to be upheld when it comes to nuclear capabilities.

But the Biden administration has so far gone in the other direction, and it could not be expected to take such a radical turn back. One can assume that the proposals that will be put forward will focus on the various arrangements that would ensure that the US keeps control over a Saudi nuclear program in a way that would prevent it from having military dimensions. A US-Saudi defense pact will also provide various means for the US to keep oversight over Riyadh's actions. All this will be able to reduce the threats, but it would not be enough to assuage Israel's fears or prevent a nuclear arms race in the region. As for the Palestinian issues, the expectation in Riyadh is that a meaningful process will put this back on the table and give the Saudi Peace Initiative from 2002 more weight when it comes to ending the Israeli-Arab conflict. The US administration may have been holding on to this prospect to put more pressure on Israel and to have the Palestinian issue move forward along the lines it wishes. This could result in Israel being asked to make concessions that it cannot realistically make. The main criteria under which Israel has to formulate its stand is reversibility: Israel must not agree to concessions that are irreversible (or that the price of reversing them is too steep).

At this point, it is hard to assess whether one should support or oppose a defense pact between Israel and the US, as this would ultimately boil down to what the details of such a deal will be once negotiations conclude. Just like there is medicine without unwanted side effects, such processes always come with drawbacks. Israel should determine its stance based on the overall calculus.

The more the proposed draft bolsters Israel's deterrence, guarantees its freedom of operation and its ability to defend itself by itself while increasing the US commitment to bolstering the Israeli military capabilities and qualitative edge, and if it all deepens the bipartisan commitment toward the Jewish state, then the Israeli stance will lean more toward a "yes." One such option is having the US be bound to help Israel only when there is an existential threat, thus potentially resolving the issue of limiting Israel's freedom of action in this regard, Israel will ask that the overall factors take into account the Saudi component. The

combustible security situation has increased the risk of violent incidents in Judea and Samaria, the Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem, as well as in Israeli prisons and on the northern border. This could adversely impact the overall public opinion on the Arab street, which wields power in decision points. In such a situation, any mini-crisis could become a big obstacle.

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