Enthusiasm but caution: How Israel should approach Saudi peace deal

written by David M. Weinberg | 30.09.2023

Israel needs to approach the emerging peace arrangements with Saudi Arabia and accompanying understandings with the US with enthusiasm but also caution.

Too much zeal for a deal in Jerusalem will boomerang in Israel's disfavor. Washington and Riyadh need the peace accord as much or more than Israel does right now, so they should pay for it – and not at Israel's expense.

Alas, it seems to me the over-ardor for a deal that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed in the US last week weakens Israel's bargaining hand. I hope that in behind-the-scenes negotiations Israel is playing a tougher game.

Let there be no mistake: I think that Israel stands at the brink of a grand, mega-historic diplomatic breakthrough. Peace with Saudi Arabia, and by extension an effective end to 100 years of Arab-Israeli conflict, truly is at hand.This is a near-messianic advance that if actualized would cement Israel's permanence in the region and its standing in the world. It would gut 120 years of Arab world ideological warfare against the Jewish return to Zion and deal a death blow to the progressive-woke assault on the legitimacy of Israel – especially if the peace is brokered by a Democratic US president.

Thus, I am wholly in favor of grabbing the opportunity and driving forward to the completion of the deal. The opportunity should be embraced, even by Republicans who dislike the boost that President Joe Biden's administration would get from a deal – and even by left-wing Israelis and liberal Diaspora Jews who detest the boost that Netanyahu would receive.

At the same time, overeagerness narrows Israel's maneuvering space. The rapidly evolving diplomatic gambit brings to the fore a series of defense issues with long-term impacts that require delicate decisions.

PERHAPS JERUSALEM should be slowing down the discussions. Too rushed an

accord could impair critical Israeli strategic interests. Too hasty an accord could undercut the even more important campaign against the nuclearization of Iran.

One such issue is the possibility of a US-Israel Defense Treaty, which the Biden-Harris Administration is seeking to accompany a likely US-Saudi Defense Treaty. The administration understands that without a matching treaty with Israel, it will have difficulty in getting a treaty with Riyadh through the Senate in a two-thirds majority vote.

Israel should not be opposed to a US-Saudi defense alliance. In fact, Israel has a vested interest in seeing the US extend further commitments to its allies in the region. But does Israel itself need or want a formal defense treaty with the US?

Might this not degrade Israel's standing in the eyes of the US public (as a 'dependent' on the US), or tie Israel's hands behind its back (especially and pointedly in a looming confrontation with Iran)? And if Israel is nevertheless going to go forward with such a treaty, what exactly can Israel ask for and gain from such an accord? In short, such a treaty needs to be negotiated guardedly.

US military aid to Israel

THIS BRINGS us to the second, related matter, which is guarantee of very long-term US military aid to Israel, including some of the weapon systems that the US thus far has refrained from supplying to Israel (like long-range refueling tankers, heavy-lift bomber aircraft, and bunker-buster bombs).

The current 10-year US-Israel military aid package (or FMS, foreign military sales, giving Israel billions of dollars in credit for the purchase of US platforms like the F-35 jet fighter) expires in less than three years. Now is the time to lock in a new package for many decades forward, in the context of new US commitments to a broad coalition of Middle East allies.

A third issue at hand is nuclearization of the Middle East. For two decades, Israel has sought to block the Iranian nuclear program because it is clearly aimed at producing multiple nuclear weapons aimed at Israel. Now Saudi Arabia is asking for US support for a Saudi civilian nuclear program that includes uranium enrichment.

Can Israel swallow this in the context of regional peace, or is the danger too high that a Saudi nuclear program could become military down the road? Wouldn't

Israeli acquiescence in a Saudi program almost assuredly guarantee and legitimize Turkish and Egyptian nuclear programs? Israel always has feared such broad nuclearization of its immediate neighborhood, and thus this may be an issue on which Israel cannot compromise without the most rigorous of security regimes.

A fourth issue is the Palestinian Authority which Israel can "bolster" but not reward because it remains thoroughly antisemitic, violent, rejectionist, and corrupt. But if Israel makes commitments to the US and/or Saudi Arabia about steps to calm the situation in the territories, and if the Saudis begin investing billions in propping up the PA (as their way of compensating for the peace with Israel) – what will be when Israel must, inevitably, strike at its enemies? Will Israel's hands be tied?

What will be when the IDF again must raid Jenin to kill terrorists, or launch another operation against Hamas in Gaza, push back much harder against Hezbollah provocations in the north, or even conduct an all-out sustained campaign to confiscate the vast amounts of weaponry that have flooded into Israeli Arab leading to both terrorist and intra-Arab political killings at frightening levels?

Will the Saudis be in a position to demand and expect Israeli "restraint" because Jerusalem "owes" Riyadh big time for the peace accord? This is not a dynamic that Israel wants to see develop, and thus these issues must be discussed and quietly fleshed out in advance.

THE FIFTH and most substantial issue of them all is the need to neutralize Iran's threatening nuclear and other military capabilities. Israel cannot acquiesce in a dynamic whereby the Biden administration expects Israeli silence on the Iran file in exchange for Biden's brokering of a Saudi-Israel peace accord.

On the contrary, especially in the context of US commitments to a regional pro-Western strategic alliance involving Saudi Arabia and Israel, Jerusalem must insist on a tougher-than-ever stance by Washington against Iran's nuclear juggernaut.

Unfortunately, unless there has been a real change of heart at the apex of the current Democratic administration, I don't see this emerging. Consequently, Israel must not give off any signals that it is going to dial down its own

interdiction efforts against Iran, under any circumstances.

As my colleague Meir Ben-Shabbat, head of the Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy (and former national security adviser to the prime minister) has written, “The more a proposed draft US-Israel Defense Treaty (and I add, other understandings between the US and Saudi Arabia) bolsters Israel’s deterrence and guarantees its freedom of operation and its ability to defend itself by itself while increasing the US commitment to bolstering Israeli military capabilities and qualitative edge, and if the overall gambit doesn’t undercut the struggle against Iran, and if all this deepens bipartisan commitment in the US toward the Jewish state – then we have a good thing going.”

If and only then, Israel should embrace the opportunities while swallowing and trying to minimize the difficulties and standing prepared to navigate a brave new world.

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