Sabotaging Saudi-Israeli Peace

written by David M. Weinberg | 06.07.2023

Actors on the US hard left are seeking to scuttle normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem. They will not tolerate any breakthrough in ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel during the tenure of Prime Minister Netanyahu and certainly not until they get their long-groused-about Palestinian state.

Worse still is that the Biden administration seems hell-bent on once again offering the mullahs of Tehran a sweetheart deal with the US: the release of $10 billion or more in frozen Iranian assets and clemency for Iran's near-breakout nuclear advances of recent years, in exchange for Iranian release of American hostages and warmed-over pious Iranian pledges to freeze the Shiite atomic bomb program at a near-breakout point.

Washington expects Israeli acquiescence in the emerging US surrender to Iran in exchange for a series of other things important to Israel. These include US backing for Israel against escalated Palestinian assaults expected this fall in UN forums; toning down US criticism regarding settlement and security matters (at a time when the IDF is going to have to intensify its anti-terrorist operations in Judea and Samaria); an easing of US pressures on Israel in connection with domestic matters (like judicial reform); a warm Washington visit for Prime Minister Netanyahu (which is not just a political concession but rather is critical to Israel's overall deterrent posture); and most of all, significant American moves towards reconciliation with Saudi Arabia (which is critical to driving a breakthrough in Israeli-Saudi ties).

In a nasty 6,000-word essay last month, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman tied all these issues together into one big bang-up assault on Israel. He started by comparing the forward-looking agenda of Saudi Arabia under its young leader Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman with the backwardness of Israel under the nationalist-haredi coalition headed by Netanyahu. Friedman then called upon the Biden administration to play hardball with Israel.

"Biden should only invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Oval Office if he will answer two questions: One, (do you admit to) occupying the West Bank and (are you) committed to resolving its permanent status through negotiations

with the Palestinians, or do you see Israel's current control of the Palestinians as the permanent status, never to be changed? We need to know once and for all."

"And two, are you committed to ensuring that any major changes to Israel's court system will be implemented with broad public support to ensure political stability, because the US has a huge interest in its most important military ally in the region not descending into civil war over judicial reform?"

Friedman barked that "For the last 75 years Israel has been a trusted and vital strategic partner of the United States, but that was always based on shared interests and shared values. If those values aren't shared any longer, we need to know that. We need to get behind those Israelis who want to preserve Israel as a democracy — and keep locking the White House gates to anyone who doesn't."

Now, Friedman takes his animus one step further, applying a bludgeon to the nascent détente between the Jewish state and the most important country in the Arab and Islamic world. He is frightened that "by rewarding Bibi with the ultimate prize of diplomatic relations with Riyadh, the Saudis could cement Netanyahu's extremist coalition in power for years —without any Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in the West Bank."

Simply put, Friedman and the Biden officials he is fronting for prefer sandbagging Netanyahu and pumping runaway Palestinian statehood to breakthrough diplomacy that would transform the Mideast. They fancy promoting Mahmoud Abbas and the rickety Palestinian Authority to advancing America's regional strategic interests and Israel's core security interests. And they favor another sell-out US deal with Iranians to a win-win-win deal that draws the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia together.

Alas, delaying Saudi normalization with Israel, and holding back on a courtesy visit to Biden's Washington for Netanyahu until Israel concedes to maximalist Palestinian demands, is a dead-end path for regional peace and stability. It is a recipe for another 100 years of unnecessary Arab-Israeli conflict, and would be yet another prize for the mullahs of Tehran.

Irony of ironies! It is not the Saudis who are placing Palestinian rights in the way of Saudi-Israeli rapprochement, but rather American pundits and politicians obsessed with the Palestinians (no matter how many wrongs the Palestinians commit).

Every serious interlocutor I know who has spent significant time in Riyadh in recent months says that Saudi leaders no longer insist on Palestinian statehood as a condition for movement towards Israel. The Saudis realize, as did the Emiratis, Bahrainis, and the Moroccans, that current Palestinian leaders are incapable of compromising for peace – and they see no reason to be held back any longer by Palestinian rejectionism.

What the Saudis need are not hackneyed exhortations and stale formulas related to Palestinians. What they need and want are concrete understandings with Washington on security and economic matters, and partnership with Israel.

THE SOUR AND REJECTIONIST approach described above is characteristic of the reluctance of progressives to fully embrace the Abraham Accords. Alas, many of them still consider the Accords a Trump-tainted gimmick or a Netanyahu-stained end-run around the Palestinians, and not an authentic breakthrough for peace and security in the Middle East.

It is hard for them to swallow the fact Arab countries are band-wagoning with Israel pointedly because Arab leaders view Israel demonstrably as a force for good, knowledge, prosperity, and stability in the Middle East.

It is even harder for the extremists among them to accept the blunt refutation inherent in the Abraham Accords of the ongoing Palestinian campaign to deny and criminalize the Jewish people's historic rights in Israel.

And the Biden administration? Sadly, it has spent the past three years sitting on the sidelines of this historic transformation.

Instead of embracing the Abraham Accords early-on and investing in their expansion, the administration effectively has sabotaged them. It has prioritized a renewed nuclear deal with Iran while beating-up on Israel and Saudi Arabia for their democratic and/or human rights deficits.

For a while Biden's aides even refused to speak the term "Abraham Accords." Only recently has the administration started talking about appointing a special envoy to drive expansion of the Accords, and only because the Saudis effectively have threatened to bolt their alliance with West.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has cozied-up to Qatar which sits securely in

Iran's regional camp, even extending non-NATO major ally status to Doha. And as mentioned above it seems about to agree to another bad deal with mullahs of Iran.

US policy must change. Despite "Trumpian residue" on the Abraham Accords and Palestinian dissatisfaction with the Abraham Accords dynamic – things that clearly bother Biden's people; and even though Saudi-Israeli ties would be a political win for Netanyahu – something that clearly bothers Biden's people too, doubling-down on the Accords should be a priority US foreign policy goal, a "no brainer."

Expansion of the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia might even move peace with Palestinians closer. It would most emphatically signal Palestinian leadership that the time to compromise with Israel has come. Perhaps Mohammed bin Salman might be able to convince Palestinians to accept the Jewish People's historic rights in Israel and reach an amicable settlement.

For this and so many other reasons, Biden administration officials and mainstream Democrats in Congress ought to move beyond their Trump traumas, Netanyahu antipathies, and Iran illusions to get behind the Abraham Accords, bringing Riyadh into the regional peace revolution.

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