

Yes to Peace with Riyadh

written by David M. Weinberg | 02.07.2023

“If there’s a fire burning in their backyard, it’s going to be a lot tougher, if not impossible, to actually both deepen the existing agreements, as well as to expand them to include potentially Saudi Arabia,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently said about the message Washington has been communicating to senior Israeli officials. During his speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, he said that the effort to have Israel and Saudi Arabia normalize ties was “incredibly challenging” but also said that it is “a real prospect.”

We shouldn’t underestimate the impact that the current security situation in Judea and Samaria may have on the normalization efforts. Public sentiment sensitivities play a role; leaders in most countries try to avoid a situation in which they go against the overall prevailing opinion of the masses. The images coming out of Judea and Samaria do not add sympathy to Israel, to say the least. They provide easy propaganda fodder for Islamists, pro-Palestinian groups, and other anti-Israel elements. When Israel is viewed in a negative light on the street, everyone has to keep a lower profile until things calm down.

That said, it appears that Blinken is keen on capitalizing on Israel’s strong urge to normalize ties with Saudi Arabia by using it as leverage on the Jewish state on the Palestinian issue. The Biden administration has yet to reach any significant accomplishment on normalization, and despite clearly showing it wants to expand the Abraham Accords, Washington doesn’t have much to show for it.

Not only have no new countries joined the accords, but the progress in the existing agreements is also only through the bilateral channels established during the previous administration. Apart from the Negev Forum, whose importance was in that it actually convened, there have not been significant projects or initiatives on a multi-national scale since the accords were signed.

The agreement with Sudan has yet to have been completed and is currently in limbo because of the ongoing civil war. Even with Morocco, with which relations have been expanding and deepening as of late, there has yet to be a shift in the political echelons that would allow a full-fledged embassy to be opened in both countries, and the king has yet to meet Israeli officials.

The truth must be said: Israel's conduct may be a factor in how the Saudis decide on normalization, but it is not the crucial factor. The US and its policies in the region have had a much stronger effect on shaping the current reality. America's weakening and its conduct in the region drove Saudi Arabia to the arms of the Chinese and as a result - albeit unintentionally - hurt the momentum with Israel.

Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a vested US interest and the West, not just in Jerusalem and Riyadh. It will drive the kingdom farther away from the Chinese-Iranian-Russian orbit and will grant the advantage it needs in the competition over the new world order. It has the potential to turn Saudi Arabia into an international hub that would connect Europe, Africa, and Asia, thus revolutionizing international trade.

As far as Israel is concerned, normalization with Saudi Arabia is an important objective, but not at all costs. Concessions on Iran and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, as well as security-related gestures on the Palestinian theater, do not give enough bang for the buck, despite the major boon normalization would be.