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WORLD MIDDLE EAST

# Saudi Arabia Moves Toward Eventual Ties With Israel

Biden administration is working to broker agreements between the two countries that could pave the way for diplomatic relations



*By Dion Nissenbaum*

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Saudi Arabia is engaging in serious talks with Israel to build business ties and create new security arrangements as the conservative Islamic kingdom senses a shift among its public in favor of establishing official ties with the majority Jewish state.

Although Saudi Arabia doesn't recognize Israel and has no diplomatic relations with its neighbor, the kingdom is expanding its secretive talks with Israeli leaders that could reshape Middle East politics and end decades of enmity between two of the region's most influential nations.

With the Biden administration's help, Saudi Arabia and Israel are trying to broker an agreement that could give commercial planes expanded rights to fly from Israel over the kingdom and pave the way for Saudi Arabia to take full control of two strategic Red Sea islands, according to people familiar with the efforts.

At the same time, Riyadh has allowed a series of Israeli businessmen to travel to Saudi Arabia as the two nations look to deepen their economic ties, according to people familiar with the visits.

The Saudi government is making the moves as it sees support growing among its public for ties with Israel. On a recent visit to Washington, Saudi Prince Khalid bin Salman, the son of Saudi King Salman and brother of the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, privately told people that recent polling showed a decisive shift, especially among Saudis under 30 years old, in favor of diplomatic relations with Israel, according to people briefed on the talks.

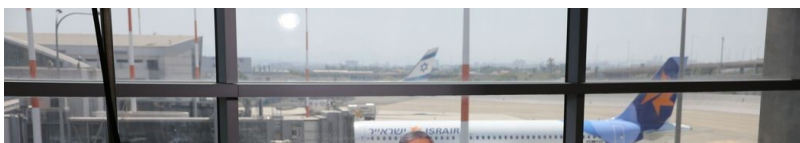
While official diplomatic relations may still be years away, the series of secret political, military and economic steps could accelerate long-building efforts to end the conflict between two countries that see a shared threat in Iran, according to people involved in the efforts.

The Saudi-Israeli talks are a key element in efforts to repair strained ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, as the Biden administration begins to embrace former President Donald Trump's push to build ties between Israel and the Arab world without waiting for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

The White House is trying to arrange a visit by President Biden to Israel and Saudi Arabia in the coming weeks for a decisive trip that could advance the political interests of all three countries.

Although Israel and Saudi Arabia have been official enemies since the Jewish majority nation was created in 1948, the two countries' unofficial ties stretch back decades and have accelerated since 2020, when the Trump administration brokered a series of deals known as the Abraham Accords to establish relations between Israel and Arab countries.

Israeli officials have flown to the kingdom for secret meetings over the years, including then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who went to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2020 in an effort to advance diplomatic talks.





Mr. Netanyahu's visit was the highest profile visit by an Israeli leader to Saudi Arabia, but it wasn't the first.

Yossi Cohen, who served as head of Israel's intelligence service when the country was brokering the normalization deals, secretly traveled several times to Saudi Arabia, where he met Prince Mohammed and visited the home of Prince Khalid, who serves as deputy defense minister, according to people familiar with the efforts.

The question is no longer if Saudi Arabia will accept Israel as a neighbor, but when, Israeli and Saudi officials say.

"We believe that it is possible to have a normalization process with Saudi Arabia," Israel Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said last week. "It's in our interest."

In a recent interview, Prince Mohammed said he supported working with Israel—a position that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

"We don't look at Israel as an enemy, we look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together," the Saudi crown prince told the Atlantic magazine. "But we have to solve some issues before we get to that."

Among those issues is a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Saudi Arabia still officially supports the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, often called the two-state solution. There haven't been serious peace talks for almost a decade, and Israel has made moves in recent years that have dimmed hopes for a Palestinian state.

"We always envisioned that there will be full normalization with Israel. A full normalization between us and Israel, between the region and Israel, will bring immense benefits," Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, the Saudi foreign minister, said recently at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "We won't be able to reap those benefits

unless we address the issue of Palestine.”



Still, Saudi and Israeli officials said they could take incremental steps toward normalization before the overall conflict is resolved, as support for the Palestinians doesn't resonate with younger people across the Middle East in the way it once did.

Saudi officials say they are disillusioned with the Palestinian Authority, run by President Mahmoud Abbas. And Saudis resent Iran's support for Hamas, the Palestinian militant group that controls the Gaza Strip.

“If Hamas builds a relationship with Iran to protect themselves, then why don't we have a relationship with Israel against Iran to protect ourselves?” said one Saudi official.

Warming Saudi-Israeli ties could help President Biden shore up frayed relations between Washington and Riyadh. He took office in 2021 with a vow to treat Saudi Arabia as a “pariah” because of its unpopular war in Yemen and a U.S. intelligence assessment that Prince Mohammed ordered a Saudi team in 2018 to abduct or kill Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi critic and Washington Post columnist.

The prospect of Mr. Biden meeting Prince Mohammed has drawn sharp criticism from lawmakers in Washington and human rights groups who want the president to take stronger steps to champion human rights in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. is looking to address criticism that it is letting Saudi leaders off the hook by pressing Riyadh to move toward a new relationship with Israel.

“Israel wants to normalize with Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia wants to normalize with

the Biden administration,” said David Makovsky, a distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

A Saudi move to establish diplomatic ties with Israel would effectively give most other Arab and Muslim nations a green light to follow suit. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and oversees its two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina.

U.S. officials have warned Saudi Arabia that it risks losing out on economic and security deals to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, countries that are quickly moving to capitalize on their new ties with Israel.

The most likely next step, Israeli and Saudi officials say, could be expanded rights for planes to fly from Israel over Saudi Arabia as part of broader talks about security on two strategic Red Sea islands—negotiations earlier reported on by Axios.

Along with the political and military rapprochement, Saudi Arabia has cleared the way for some Israelis—once barred from entering the kingdom—to fly to Riyadh in recent months for a series of meetings meant to deepen business ties between the two countries, according to people involved in the efforts. Saudi Arabia’s major sovereign-wealth fund has already given former Trump administration official Jared Kushner the green light to invest some of its money in Israeli companies for the first time.

The U.S. is also trying to secure a deal that would allow Saudi Arabia to take full security control of two Red Sea islands—Tiran and Sanafir—that require approval from Israel.

The islands, which sit in a strategic location between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea, have been at the center of a regional tug of war for decades between Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt and currently host an international force that provides security.

The three countries are now looking at a proposal to move the multinational force off the islands and allow Saudi Arabia to control security in both places, according to people involved in the talks. The deal is seen as another way for Israel and Saudi Arabia to show they are improving ties.

—*Summer Said, Stephen Kalin and Dov Lieber contributed to this article.*

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