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WORLD MIDDLE EAST

# Saudi Arabia-Iran Pact Marks Setback to Israel's Efforts to Counter Tehran

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made securing a regional alliance opposed to Iran a key foreign-policy aim



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier this month.

PHOTO: FRANCESCO FOTIA/ZUMA PRESS

By *Shayndi Raice* [Follow](#) and *Aaron Boxerman*

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JERUSALEM—Saudi Arabia's surprise agreement to renew diplomatic relations with Iran marks a significant blow to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's key foreign-policy goal: creating a regional alliance built around isolating Iran.

Mr. Netanyahu has long led the charge to garner international support for isolating Iran and halting its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Israel views Iran as its primary global foe because of its support for proxy militias across the Middle East that target Israel, such as Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Gaza-based Hamas, both designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S.

Also, as part of the effort to counter Iran, Mr. Netanyahu has made normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia a central goal, with hopes of creating a security-based alliance made up of Sunni Arab countries and Israel. Normalization with Saudi Arabia—home to Islam's two holiest sites—could also pave the way for

more peace deals with other Muslim countries.

Mr. Netanyahu's "premier goals are isolating Iran and expanding relations with Arab countries. And at the moment, he's failed at both," said Aviv Bushinsky, a former chief of staff to Mr. Netanyahu.

A spokesman for Mr. Netanyahu declined to comment.

Israeli news outlets reported that a senior official traveling with Mr. Netanyahu on a trip to Rome on Friday blamed the previous Israeli government and the Biden administration for the deal.

"There was a feeling of American and Israeli weakness, so Saudi Arabia turned to other channels," the official said, according to Israeli news outlets.

Israel's regional foes hailed the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran. The Palestinian militant group Hamas called it "an important step to unify the ranks of the Islamic people."

"This is a positive development," said Hassan Nasrallah, who leads Hezbollah. "It is in the interest of all the peoples of the region."

On Friday, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations in a deal mediated by China, ending seven years of estrangement and calling into question the historical geopolitical alignments in the Middle East. The agreement shows that Middle East diplomacy is no longer solely dominated by the U.S., Israel's biggest and most important ally.

That Washington's main competitor, China, negotiated the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran should be concerning to Israel, said Yoel Guzansky, a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

"The less influence the U.S. has in the region, the worse it is for Israel," said Mr. Guzansky.





Israelis demonstrating against the government's plans for a judicial overhaul.

PHOTO: AMIR LEVY/GETTY IMAGES

The deal also underscores how multiple crises at home—including a plan to overhaul the country's judiciary and growing violence in Israel and the occupied West Bank—have set back Mr. Netanyahu's ability to move forward on his foreign-policy aims. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been protesting Mr. Netanyahu's government's plans to overhaul the judiciary for 10 weeks.

Rising violence between Israel and the Palestinians—whose cause the Arab world has long championed—is also a complicating factor for Mr. Netanyahu's push for closer ties with Riyadh. At least 80 Palestinians and 14 Israelis have been killed since the beginning of 2023. Observers fear tensions could spike during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which has touched off broader escalations in recent years.

Political analysts and some Israeli politicians say the government has been focused on the internal situation to the detriment of the regional chessboard.

“The world doesn't stop while we busy ourselves with power struggles and head-butting certainly not the worst of our foes,” said Yuli Edelstein, a senior member of Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party, after the deal was announced Friday.

Many think Israel could still work with Gulf countries by cooperating on intelligence or air defense. Re-establishing diplomatic relations isn't likely to immediately lessen the longstanding security and sectarian tensions that have divided Riyadh and Tehran for decades and fueled their competition for regional dominance, analysts said.

Political analysts say the deal is a sign that Arab countries like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia won't welcome any overt aggression against Iran,

and could even be reluctant to quietly conflict with Iran.

Some collaborations could be out of the question now. For example, if Israel were to attack an Iranian nuclear facility—as many suspect it might one day—it would require permission to use Saudi airspace, a far less likely scenario now that it has renewed diplomatic relations with Iran.

“Would the Saudis be willing to even quietly join a coalition against Iran? Would they be willing to open up their airspace?” said Mark Dubowitz, chief executive of the Washington, D.C.-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a think tank. “I think all of that is now being called into question.”

Still, the U.S. remains the dominant player in the region and the Saudis are taking a chance by undercutting their alliance with the Americans, say some political analysts.



President Biden in a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, last year.

PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In exchange for normalization with Israel, Saudi Arabia is asking the U.S. to provide security guarantees and help in developing its civilian nuclear program, people involved in discussions between the two countries told The Wall Street Journal.

Dan Shapiro, director of the N7 Initiative at the Atlantic Council, an effort to expand normalization efforts between Israel and the Arab world, said the deal brokered by China could make it a lot harder for Saudi Arabia to gain any

significant concessions from the U.S.

“This deal is going to require some balancing by the Saudis if they want to be serious about taking that step forward,” said Mr. Shapiro about normalization with Israel. “I think [Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman] is trying to play all fields here and that can backfire.”

*—Dov Lieber contributed to this article.*

Write to Shayndi Raice at [Shayndi.Raice@wsj.com](mailto:Shayndi.Raice@wsj.com)

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