

Middle Eastern politics & society

Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu vow to work together to normalise Israel-Saudi relations

US president pledges to address 'hard issues' at talks with Israel's prime minister in New York



Benjamin Netanyahu, left, talks with Joe Biden on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York on Wednesday © Reuters

Felicia Schwartz in Washington YESTERDAY

US President Joe Biden met Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday for the first time since Israel's prime minister returned to office, with the two leaders pledging to work together to advance the normalisation of Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia.

The meeting took place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, rather than Washington, more than eight months after Netanyahu returned to power, underscoring the deep friction between the pair.

Netanyahu's far-right government and the Biden administration have clashed over the Israeli leader's contentious judicial overhaul, his treatment of the Palestinians and opposition to US diplomacy with Iran.

Biden said ahead of the meeting that the pair would address "some of the hard issues" and that he hoped to welcome Netanyahu to the White House by the end of the year. The White House later said the president invited him, though no date for the visit has been set.

This was taken as a sign that Biden may be willing to put some of those differences behind him as the two seek common cause in [normalising relations](#) between Israel and Saudi Arabia, a long-sought goal for both governments.

“If you and I, 10 years ago, were talking about normalisation with Saudi Arabia, I think we’d look at each other like, ‘who’s been drinking what?’” Biden said.

A White House account of the meeting said they discussed normalisation and Iran, among other issues, and Biden urged Netanyahu to take immediate measures to address the deteriorating security situation in the West Bank and repeated his concern about “any fundamental changes to Israel’s democratic system, absent the broadest possible consensus”.

Netanyahu, already [Israel](#)’s longest-serving prime minister who returned to office in December after a period in opposition, said he was optimistic that the long-shot attempt to finally establish full ties between his country and Saudi Arabia would bear fruit during Biden’s tenure.

“I think that under your leadership, Mr President, we can forge a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia,” Netanyahu said. “I think such a peace would go a long way for us to advance the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, achieve reconciliation between the Islamic world and the Jewish state and advance a genuine peace between [Israel and the Palestinians](#).”

The three-way deal between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia could include civil nuclear co-operation and some kind of defence pact between Washington and Riyadh, as well as some Israeli gesture towards the Palestinians, the Financial Times has reported.

After the meeting, a senior US administration official said “normalisation is a very complicated issue”.

“Nobody has ever said this is right around the corner,” the official said. “We have been making some progress . . . and there’s some ways to travel on this before we get there.”

Netanyahu has long opposed US efforts, first under former president Barack Obama and now under Biden, to reach a diplomatic arrangement with Iran to address its nuclear programme.

Washington and Tehran this week [completed a prisoner swap deal](#) that will also mean the US moving \$6bn in frozen Iranian assets from South Korea to an account in Qatar. US diplomats viewed the deal as a confidence-building measure that could allow them to address other issues, including Iran’s nuclear programme.

Netanyahu said: “That shared goal of ours can be achieved by a credible military

threat, crippling sanctions and supporting the brave men and women of Iran who despise that regime and who are our real partners for a better future.”

Biden has been unusually public in his opposition to Netanyahu’s plans to overhaul his country’s Supreme Court and other judicial changes, urging Israel’s leader to build consensus. Netanyahu reaffirmed his commitment to democracy in remarks ahead of Wednesday’s meeting.

“We will continue to uphold the values that both our proud democracies cherish,” he said.

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