

**US foreign policy**

## Senior Democrats warn Joe Biden on push to normalise Saudi-Israel relations

Senators voice concern about aspects of a deal that are likely to require congressional approval



US president Joe Biden, right, at a meeting with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York © Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

**Felicia Schwartz** in Washington YESTERDAY

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A group of 20 Democratic senators has voiced significant concerns about the Biden administration's efforts to normalise relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, raising the prospect that any such pact will face a tough path through Congress.

In a letter to President [Joe Biden](#), the senators said they were concerned about deepening security ties with Riyadh, adding that any deal must involve Israel offering significant concessions towards Palestinians.

“A bad deal could compromise US national security priorities,” Senator Chris Murphy, one of the authors, told reporters. Murphy, along with fellow senators Chris Van Hollen, Peter Welch and Senate majority whip Dick Durbin were among the other signatories.

“The US has long refrained from committing our nation to treaty-backed security guarantees in the volatile Middle East, a region rife with conflict. A high degree of proof would be required to show that a binding defence treaty with Saudi Arabia . . . aligns with US interests,” the letter said.

The intervention comes as the US pushes ahead with what would be a historic deal to normalise relations between [Israel](#) and Saudi Arabia but highlights the political

hurdles in its path.

Under the [broad terms](#) of a deal between the three countries, the US would offer some security guarantees to Riyadh, as well as assistance with a civilian nuclear programme, while Israel would take steps towards improving conditions for the Palestinians.

Any US security commitments and nuclear assistance would almost certainly require congressional approval.

The Democrats indicated they were wary of Saudi Arabia's request to enrich uranium on its own soil as part of a civil nuclear co-operation agreement.

Their approval of any deal would also depend on Israel taking meaningful steps towards halting settlement growth and increasing the freedom of movement for Palestinians, the letter indicated. Such commitments from Israel were "essential to any sustainable peace in the Middle East and to preserving Israel's own future as a Jewish, democratic state", it added.

The senators said they were concerned about Saudi Arabia's desire for a security guarantee, given the kingdom's human rights record. Congress has been critical of Saudi Arabia following Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018 as well as the kingdom's recent decisions to slash oil production.

"If we're going to have an arrangement with Saudi Arabia, which has had a bad human rights record, where they flirt with China and stick it to us on the oil price, I mean, what is in it for us? We're asking that question," Welch told reporters on Wednesday.

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