

Israel-Hamas war

US says defence pact with Saudi Arabia not possible without Israel deal

National security adviser Jake Sullivan tells FT Weekend Festival three-way pact necessary for Mideast peace



The FT's Edward Luce interviews Jake Sullivan at the FT Weekend Festival in Washington on Saturday

Felicia Schwartz and **Steff Chávez** in Washington and **Andrew England** in London
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US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the Biden administration would not sign a defence agreement with Saudi Arabia if the kingdom and Israel did not agree to normalise relations, insisting “you can’t disentangle one piece from the others”.

In an interview at the FT Weekend Festival on Saturday, Sullivan dismissed recent suggestions that a bilateral deal between the Biden administration and the kingdom was being considered if Israel refused to make concessions to the Palestinians.

The Biden administration has been pushing a three-way deal to encourage Riyadh to formalise diplomatic ties with Israel as part of plans to ensure a sustainable peace in the Middle East after Hamas’s October 7 attack triggered the near seven-month war in Gaza. It hopes to use the prospect of the kingdom — long Israel’s grand prize — and other Muslim states normalising relations to convince Israel to agree to significant concessions to the Palestinians.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected any moves towards a two-state solution to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“The integrated vision is a bilateral understanding between the US and Saudi Arabia combined with normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, combined

with meaningful steps on behalf of the Palestinian people,” Sullivan said. “All of that has to come together . . . you can’t disentangle one piece from the others.”

PLAY | 01:00

Jake Sullivan says Israel needs to be part of a deal to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia © FT Live

Sullivan said that President Joe Biden intended to publicly detail “the path [to] . . . a more peaceful region”.

“I do expect in the months ahead that you will hear from the president and others of us more of the . . . of the path that we believe could produce a more secure Israel and a more peaceful region,” Sullivan said.

He added: “All we can do is work out what we think makes sense, [and] try to get as many countries in the region on board with it and then present it, and it will ultimately be up to the Israeli leadership and frankly ultimately the Israeli people can decide whether that’s a path they want to take or not.”

The Biden administration was edging towards a deal for Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel before October 7, which would have led to Washington agreeing to a defence pact with Riyadh and supporting its civilian nuclear ambitions in return for Israel making concessions to the Palestinians.

Hamas’s attack and Israel’s retaliatory offensive in Gaza upended that process, but the US and Saudi Arabia have continued to discuss a potential deal as part of wider postwar plans to secure peace in the region.

But Saudi Arabia has made it clear that after October 7 it would require Israel to make far more significant concessions to Palestinians, insisting it would need to see “irreversible steps” towards the establishment of Palestinian state

see irreversible steps towards the establishment of Palestinian state.

Some analysts believed that media reports this week that the US and Saudi Arabia were considering moving ahead with a bilateral deal if Israel refused to take concrete steps towards a Palestinian state were designed to put pressure on Netanyahu's government.

PLAY | 00:39

Jake Sullivan talks about a path to peace in the Middle East © FT Live

Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said this week that Riyadh and Washington were “very close” to a bilateral agreement on the US element of a deal, but reiterated that there also “needs to be truly a pathway to a Palestinian state” that is “credible and irreversible”.

Yet Netanyahu, who faces intense pressure from far-right members of his governing coalition to make no concessions to the Palestinians, boasts that he has for years successfully thwarted any progress towards a two-state solution.

Sullivan was speaking as CIA chief Bill Burns was in Cairo, where mediators are seeking to convince Hamas to accept a proposal for deal that would lead to a ceasefire and the release of hostages held in Gaza. Mediators hope to broker an initial six week pause in fighting that would then be used to negotiate a sustainable ceasefire.

US officials have praised Israel for making concessions on the terms for a deal, but Netanyahu still insists that he will launch an offensive in Rafah, the southern Gazan city where more than 1mn people have sought sanctuary.

Arab states have for months been discussing with Washington their vision for a

These states have for months been discussing with Washington their vision for a postwar plan, which includes the US and other western powers recognising a Palestinian state and supporting its full membership of the UN and a reformed Palestinian leadership administering Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

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