

# US-Saudi defense deal: opportunities and obstacles

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The United States is trying to upgrade its relations with Saudi Arabia. Yet, the ongoing war in Gaza is a major obstacle.



Credit: VOA

## Introduction

The US has exerted every effort to reach [a defence agreement](#) with Saudi Arabia in recent days. Washington aims to stay long-term in the strategically important defence sector of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), notwithstanding its gradual withdrawal from the Middle East. Officials in the United States plan to sign a trilateral deal involving Israel. It would allow the US to 'sell' this deal in Congress with ease, as it would be difficult to persuade members of a body that advocates for mutual defense otherwise. Reaching this trilateral agreement would give the US more power to advance the recently announced plan to

connect India and Europe through the Middle East ([the India-Middle East Economic Corridor](#)). Washington primarily views this initiative as a larger diplomatic effort to counterbalance China's rise in Asia, particularly in the Middle East.

Israel would benefit from the extension of the Abraham accords as well, since Riyadh would acknowledge the Israel's existence in the Middle East and make the largely covert contacts more visible. But Riyadh has tightened its stance towards Israel due to the ongoing planning for a complete ground invasion of Rafah and the possible civilian losses. For Riyadh to sign any agreement, there are [two primary requirements](#): 1. creation of a Palestinian state with full sovereignty; 2. obtaining US clearance for Saudi Arabia's civilian nuclear programme. The latter could proceed even without a bilateral agreement with Israel. Nevertheless, any agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel would be extremely difficult to accomplish given the current Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip and its repercussions.

#### Israeli dilemmas: normalisation or marginalization?

Both inside and outside, there has been constant pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu's war administration. As Israel prepares for a ground invasion of Rafah, the Biden administration has decided to withhold one shipment of heavy bombs weighing between 500 and 2,000 pounds, which may have a devastating effect on the civilian population. Since providing Israel with military assistance is required by law, this does not imply that US support for Israel has altered. The US ambassador to Israel, [Jack Lew](#), said that 'fundamentally, nothing has changed in the basic relationship' between the United States and Israel.

The Arab governments are also applying pressure on Israel on a regional level, pressing the Israel to propose a two-state solution-based political settlement to the Gaza conflict. The so-called [Arab contact group](#), comprising Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, and the Palestinian Authority, recently endorsed a proposal calling on Israel to establish a Palestinian state along the 1967 boundary with East Jerusalem as its capital. The United States immediately rejected it. The UN General Assembly has [approved a resolution](#) (9 states are against, 143 are in favour, and 25 abstain) to reevaluate the Palestinian State's full membership in the UN on the request of the United Arab Emirates. The US had previously vetoed Palestine's full membership in the Security Council.

Members of the War Cabinet have been putting increasing pressure on the Netanyahu government. [Benny Gantz threatens](#) Netanyahu with resigning from the war cabinet if there are no plans for Gaza after the war by June 8. Gantz would focus more on US critics and the necessity for greater devotion to the Palestinian cause in light of Saudi Arabia's possible normalization. The discovery of [four more hostage remains](#) by Hamas on October 7th, however, has strengthened the calls for an imminent ground offensive in Rafah by far-right members of the Netanyahu administration. Since Netanyahu has been struggling in recent years to maintain his political position, any concession on the Palestinian issue would not appease his detractors.

From a practical standpoint, this implies that Israel would lose [Riyadh to Rafah](#) and experience more pressure and marginalization. This author thinks that a more integrated and normalized Middle East will preserve Israel in the foreseeable future, not Washington. It is accurate, as [Benny Gantz points](#) out, to claim that there is little up for negotiation. It is evident from some of the prime minister's internal allies that Israel intends to remain in Gaza for a minimum of [ten years](#). Hamas must be destroyed in one to two years, with the next eight years being currently unknown.

The recent [announcement by Karim Khan](#), the head prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, that he has asked for arrest warrants for Israel's prime minister, defence minister, and three senior Hamas officials further exacerbated the situation. Netanyahu remarked that it represented a new wave of antisemitism. After the terrorist attack by Hamas, it is difficult to convince anyone in Israel of the two-state solution. However, in a volatile area where the US is gradually losing power, Israel would pay a heavy price for decades of ignoring the Palestinian issue.

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