



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Is the Saudi-Israeli agreement achievable - A difficult and expensive process, but worth the effort



With his silence on US support for the Saudi civil nuclear programme in exchange for the normalisation of Saudi-Israeli relations, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken could convince few that this was not discussed during his two-day visit to Riyadh.

Wrapping up his visit to Saudi Arabia, Blinken reiterated on Thursday that his country's priority is the normalisation of relations between Israel and its neighbours, as a pathway to even better integration in the region.

Despite his refusal to say how he was going to persuade Riyadh to normalise relations with Israel, his trip to Saudi Arabia had the issue at the top of the agenda.

The profit from making an Israeli-Saudi deal would be huge, not only for the US as the main mediator, but also for the two still very distant actors, as well as for the entire region.

That is why Riyadh's demands on Washington are very high; for some, even unachievable. However, they are still on the table and are definitely being discussed.

Nuclear programme in focus

Antony Blinken is the second high-ranking representative of the US Administration to visit Riyadh in the last month. Before him, at the beginning of May, Jake Sullivan, White House national security adviser, paid a visit.

Washington is sending its top negotiators to Saudi Arabia because, and even has a reason, to praise Riyadh at this stage, in order to upgrade relations from the very low point they have been at since the beginning of Joe Biden's

presidential term.

The allegations about a long list of demands of Riyadh towards the US, in order to thaw relations with Israel, have never been confirmed, but neither have they been denied.

The main one is the US support for establishing a civilian nuclear programme in Saudi Arabia. At a joint press conference with Blinken, Prince Faisal bin Farhan said that Saudi Arabia would prefer to have the US as a bidder for the programme.

He did not link this project to the normalisation of relations with Israel, but he did not have to.

Riyadh's demands towards the US also concern an increase in arms deliveries, as well as security guarantees, such as the involvement of the US in Saudi Arabia if it is attacked by Iran.

The return of the US to the Middle East

The Biden Administration has many reasons to meet these demands, because their result would be a major reconfiguration of relations in the region, according to US interests.

This deal would mark a significant return of the US to the Middle East, after a long period of passivity, which was exploited by other strategic competitors, above all China.

However, Washington will have to invest a lot of energy and promises to bring the Saudis and Israelis closer together, and above all to

remove the reservations in Riyadh regarding the Biden Administration.

Before it even began, his presidential mandate was marked by Biden's statement that he wanted to make Saudi Arabia an "international pariah" because of its involvement in the war in Yemen, and especially because of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

President Biden, according to intelligence reports, claimed that this act was approved by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

Moreover, the US is under a time pressure to produce an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel by the end of the year.

President Biden could thus enter the campaign for a new mandate with a shining trophy and a significant foreign policy victory, as convincing proof of American leadership in the Middle East.

The maximalist demands of the Saudis

They know all this in Riyadh. Hence, their position towards the US is very similar to bargaining in the oriental markets, where the deal starts from the maximum price.

The information about the conditions of Saudi Arabia towards the US, in order to get closer to Israel, was published at the same time that Riyadh, under the mediation of China, concluded a very important agreement on the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Iran.

This March was a real diplomatic earthquake,

not only in the Middle East, but globally, as Beijing emerged as a mediator in resolving the most complicated and long-running disputes between major regional players.

From time perspective of time, and especially with the increasingly intense dialogue between Washington and Riyadh recently, it seems that Saudi Arabia wanted to raise the negotiation price and conditions with regard to the US with this agreement, knowing that the moment would come.

A positive calculation for Israel

And Israel has a positive calculation regarding the normalisation with Saudi Arabia, because its cooperation could reduce the international (American) pressure regarding its controversial laws on the judiciary.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be very inclined towards an arrangement with the Saudis, expecting that it could stabilise the positions of his government, and increase Israel's influence on events in the region.

However, its far-right coalition partners may be a major obstacle, as they are unwilling to make concessions to the Palestinians, which is one of Riyadh's main demands on Israel.

Netanyahu's government could end up with a crisis, and even fall if the negotiations with the Saudis progress far enough, but this is also an opportunity for the US to show its influence in the region and force the extremists to compromise, for the sake of mutual benefit.

Pessimists estimate that the deal is not particularly promising, because the gap between Biden's Administration and the

leadership of the Kingdom is too deep, and that Riyadh does not want to reward Biden with a significant political gain ahead of the race for a new mandate with an agreement with Israel.

However, it is precisely the Democratic Administration that has the capacity to improve Riyadh's position in Washington, which the Saudis care deeply about.

The agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as one of the most important reached in the Middle East in decades, would be a strong argument for softening the hostility towards Saudi Arabia among many Democrats in Congress.

It is also one of the important results that Saudi Arabia wants to achieve in the normalisation of negotiations with Israel.

With an achievable agreement, they will ask for huge concessions from everyone involved, and within a short period of time.

However, it is worth the effort because it has a large potential to stabilise the Middle East and reduce the influence of autocratic factors from outside, which has become very pronounced due to US passivity.