



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# A grand deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia is possible - do the benefits outweigh the price everyone will have to pay



Without making any concessions to its opponents, supported by hundreds of thousands of protesters, Benjamin Netanyahu's government decided to continue forward with its intention to strengthen its own authority and the authority of the parliament over the Supreme Court.

It will come as no surprise if this development turns out to be the consequence of a much wider engagement where the stakes reach beyond Israel's internal borders and its democracy.

These issues centre on a massive reconfiguration of relations in the Middle Eastern, particularly in the triangle between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The first of several laws to limit some of the Supreme Court's authority by the government and the parliament was passed with a narrow majority in the Knesset. The opposition boycotted the vote while right-wing coalition deputies celebrated the decision.

While Israel is still experiencing a political crisis, accompanied by widespread protests and may be facing a constitutional crisis, the sequence of events leading up to the adoption of the controversial law suggests that the new Israeli law is only one piece of a larger puzzle put together with many compromises and concessions.

## The green light from Washington

The controversial law, opposed by a substantial part of Israeli society, was passed just one week after the US president had a lengthy phone conversation with the Israeli prime minister on July 17.

A special confirmation came in the shape of Biden's offer to meet by the end of the year, which gave PM Netanyahu hope that he is still a factor that the US, their most significant partner, wants to talk to.

Even though the US President asked the Israeli PM to find the broadest consensus on internal disputes during the call, the messages that he is still a partner to be reckoned with in Washington were more significant for Netanyahu.

Therefore, the conversation between Biden and Netanyahu was the first green light for the ruling bloc in Israel to continue with the plan of the so-called judiciary "reform", which is a significant concession for the cabinet of the Israeli PM.

## Negotiations and bargaining in the big triangle

In parallel with this thawing of relations, Washington has been working intensively with Saudi Arabia to reach an agreement with Israel, a diplomatic task that President Biden considers to be of the utmost importance.

According to the US expectations, this deal would be a "game changer" for relations in the Middle East, the pinnacle of Biden's foreign policy mandate and substantial investment in securing a new one.

The recent frequent visits of high-ranking US administration officials to Saudi Arabia (Secretary Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan) have been aimed at achieving a complex but significant deal, which would signal the historic rapprochement of the two largest regional powers.

This could only be accomplished in a big triangle by making concessions and bargaining. It appears achievable because everyone would be content with future profits. Or nearly everyone.

It is already possible to see one of the "victims" of a potential future deal. It is the liberal Israeli public that has been protesting in the streets for months to stop the Netanyahu administration from limiting the Supreme Court's important role in controlling the democratic order.

The US reacted quite mildly to the adoption of the disputed law in the Knesset as "unfortunate".

This shows that Washington has suppressed its prior fear for Israeli democracy and has shifted to the more significant and politically advantageous project of a historic rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This is in line with Biden's most recent reconciliation with Netanyahu.

## A risk Netanyahu can take

By enacting the controversial law, Netanyahu appeased the right-wing hawks in his government and secured substantial international support for them. But he will have to ask for significant concessions from them in the following stages, for which he will take advantage of the recently passed law on the judiciary.

Israel will face demands from Saudi Arabia to moderate its radical policy towards the Palestinians and abandon its plans to annex the Palestinian territories.

Since this will be practically unacceptable for Netanyahu's partners from the extreme right,

the Israeli PM might lose the majority in his cabinet today and be compelled to participate in new elections, which he finds unfavourable.

However, since he passionately wants a deal with Saudi Arabia because it would place him put him at the top of the great Israeli prime ministers who made historic decisions, Netanyahu might pay the price of the collapse of the current coalition.

In that case, while advocating a deal with Riyadh, Netanyahu could enlist the support of centrist parties, now in opposition, who also favour a grand Middle East deal.

## Saudi Arabia's security requirements

Saudi Arabia also wants a major deal with Israel, as it would cement its leadership authority in the Arab world.

Riyadh has even greater expectations from the concessions it would receive from the US regarding security issues.

That complex of demands starts from the purchase of highly advanced American weapons through NATO-level mutual relations, which would mean the participation of the US in the defence of Saudi Arabia if attacked, and up to a civilian nuclear programme monitored by the US.

If they reach an agreement, they could expect significant political and security dividends because they have secured an arrangement that would undoubtedly cause a positive shift in the region.

Understandably, not without collateral

"sacrifices" on each side as the price for reaching a compromise.

"A U.S.-Saudi security pact that produces normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and the Jewish state would be a game changer for the Middle East, bigger than the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Because peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia... would open the way for peace between Israel and the whole Muslim world, including giant countries like Indonesia and perhaps even Pakistan", wrote the New York Times' Thomas L. Friedman, based on his recent conversations with President Biden.