## **QI Panel: Debating Saudi-Israeli Normalization: Does it Advance U.S. Interest?**

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**Steven Simon 1:07**

Hello. My name is Steven Simon. And I'm here to welcome you to a discussion sponsored by the Quincy Institute for Responsible statecraft. On Saudi, US, Israel, normalization diplomacy. The administration has launched a complex diplomatic process that allegedly, if it works out would result in the normalization of Saudi relations with Israel, US security guarantees for Saudi Arabia of some kind, and assistance to the Saudi civilian nuclear program. This is quite an ambitious agenda. I'd like to refer to something that Secretary of State Antony Blinken just said about this arrangement in a conversation with George Stephanopoulos. He said, when it comes to possible normalization, between Saudi Arabia and Israel, this would be a transformative event. We've had decades of turmoil, decades of conflict in the Middle East, to bring these two countries together in particular, would have a powerful effect and stabilizing the region in integrating the region and bringing people together not having them at each other's throats. Now, it's hard to get there. There are things the Saudis are looking for, things that the Israelis are looking for, and we'd be looking for that make getting to yes a challenge. But but we see the reward if we can get there as being well worth the effort. He says, uh, furthermore, it would be one of the biggest changes for the good that we've seen in that part of the world. And beyond that, I think you'd see positive repercussions well beyond the Middle East. Well, this is, you know, borders on the Messianic, in a way and it's it's startling, actually, because Secretary Blinken is, you know, a cautious and thoughtful person who's generally careful in his approach to policy issues. So, this utopian view of of the agreement and global effects it will have the positive global effects it will have is, is a bit puzzling given what we know thus far. Now we have with us to discuss this superb panel. Ellen Lipson is head of the master's program at the short school at GMU George Mason University. And she's had a distinguished government career before heading into academics, including as the National Intelligence Officer for Middle East when she was in the intelligence community. This is a very distinguished post. Gregory Gauss is the author of two, two books, the international relations of the Persian Gulf and a book on the oil monarchies. Both of these were instant classics. He's now head of the Bush School in Washington or is it was it the bush School generally I'm not really I'm not really sure.

**Gregory Gause 5:04**

Just a professor at the Bush school's, Washington DC teaching site, doing a little bit of admin, but please don't make it ahead of anything.

**Steven Simon 5:13**

Oh, and okay, so maybe we can find someone else. That's great. That's you. It's called a prevent promotion. And lastly, the Senior VP, Senior Vice executive vice president at Quincy Institute for Responsible statecraft Trita Parsi, who's the author of a number of books on the US and Iran and the US, and, and Israel and the prize winning author at that, and knows the Iran scene extremely well, and particularly the recent diplomacy between the United States and Iran, going back to 2000, the pre 2015 period, when the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal was being negotiated. So, as I said, a superb panel here, I'm going to start with, with Professor Gauss, Greg, what? What's in this for the Saudis? Number one. And number two, what's in it for the US? I mean, we're no longer reliant on on Gulf Oil. There's no one who's going to threaten it in any case, at least as far as we know, right now. And the United States, moreover, has had a difficult period in its bilateral relations with the kingdom. And I include the Biden administration, you know, at its outset, in that, so what, what explains this sudden burst of interest in securing the US relations with Saudi Arabia, and in such a dramatic and potentially costly way?

**Gregory Gause 7:31**

Thanks, Steve. And it's a pleasure to be with such a distinguished group of friends and colleagues. On the Saudi side, I've always thought ever since Sadat signed the Camp David Accords, in the Egyptian Israeli peace, that every Arab agreement with Israel is really an Arab agreement with the United States, in which the Israeli element is the door through which these Arab countries can improve their relationship with the United States. And I don't think that this speculation about the possibility of a Saudi Israeli normalization is any different. The Saudis have been very clear and much more transparent than they usually are, about what they want out of this and security guarantee from the United States, particularly in the wake of the 2019 Iranian attack on the Saudi oil facilities and appcake and raise, which I think people on our side tend not to, not to appreciate how, how shocking that was for the Saudis. I think that what the Saudis want is what they say that they want a security guarantee. They want help on the nuclear program, and, and for their own reasons, elite reasons and, and slightly public opinion reasons they want they want something for the Palestinians. So I think that what the Saudis want is pretty clear. And it's from the United States. It's not from Israel so much. Why does the United States want this? I have to say, like you I was puzzled by the intensity of the US diplomatic effort here. Clearly, this would be a you know, a moose had to put up on the wall. Right. You get Saudi Arabia and Israel opening up embassies in each other's capitals. You can you can say to your potential Republican opponent in the 2024 election. Well, you got back rain in the UAE, I got Saudi Arabia. And so you can kind of understand the short term domestic political incentives here. To some extent that Ukraine war has brought home to to the United States that says that despite the fact fact that the United States is a net exporter of oil. Now, we're not reliant on on oil imports from not just the Persian Gulf, but really anywhere in the short term. It did bring home the continuing role of the Persian Gulf, and particularly Saudi Arabia as the largest producer in the Persian Gulf, the largest exporter and the country with the most spare capacity to either bring oil onto the market or take oil off the market, as we see right now. And I think that that did kind of sober up folks in the Biden administration about this idea that we don't need Saudi anymore. But But the long term implications of a security guarantee with Saudi Arabia are, I think, something that needs to be thought through. And I'm sure we'll do that today.

**Steven Simon 10:52**

Just ask one quick follow up. Who does Saudi Arabia fear?

**Gregory Gause 11:03**

So I think that the Saudis, Iran, but I also think that the Saudis see the, the emerging new global power structure, you know, more multipolar as as advantageous to them. And that they have a relationship with China as, as one of their major customers and Saudi Arabia as one of the major suppliers of energy to China. And they have an interesting and complicated relationship with Russia as the only other major oil producer, that can have an impact on the world market, depending upon how much oil they decide to bring on or take off, which is why the Saudis need the Russians. And I think that the Chinese relationship is pretty straightforward. I think the Russian relationship is more like frenemies, because they don't always they're not always on the same page on on energy market issues. But I think the Saudis see some running room for themselves, after decades of, of what they felt was something of a constricting need to always be on side with the with the US either during the Cold War or in a period of American unipolarity.

**Steven Simon 12:33**

A treaty mutual defense treaty along the lines of the US Korea Treaty, which seemed to signify a reversion to bipolarity. And, and be somewhat inconsistent, at least, with a vision of the world as a multipolar arrangement in which the Saudis and other non aligned states for lack of a better word have room to roam. So there's something I don't get here. And I'm hoping that we can explore it.

**Gregory Gause 13:07**

Yeah. And I think that the, you know, what will be a sticking point, if we eventually get to that point is just how much of security agreement with the United States constrains the Saudi or the Saudis in their relations with China, Russia and others?

**Steven Simon 13:24**

Okay, let's, let's move on to Ellen Laipson, Ellen, when you hear Tony Blinken talking about this sort of transformational impact of an Israeli Saudi peace agreement on the region and the world. I'm wondering whether you view it, you know, as as as so powerful. A development as as Blinken does, and and why?

**Steven Simon 14:08**

You're muted.

**Ellen Laipson**

I'm sorry, can you hear me now? Okay. Sorry about that. So I also am still a little bit scratching my head on the logic underpinning this. But I start with the premise that the Biden administration truly truly believes that diplomacy is their strong suit, and is the legacy that they want to leave behind of making the world a better place. So they look around the world and they look for things where they can add value. This one is a little bit of a stretch, but let's remember that it is, in a way, the culmination of the Abraham accords that the previous administration began. And perhaps the logic is, you know, as I think Greg said, let's finish up with with the Big Bang instead of the small kind. Trees, including Morocco and Sudan and countries that are not strategically important to Israel. Let's end with the big one. But it is so counterintuitive on so many levels. But so one point is, regionally is this an attempt by the Saudis with the Israelis as kind of supporting cast players to just make sure the United States stays engaged? The great worry earlier in this administration had been that there was a trendline, really, from Obama through Trump to Biden, of lowering the American footprint and a lot of the American engagement in the region. So is this the regional powers say, giving us kind of an inducement to stay more formally committed to the region, contrary to what I think are the preferences of three successive presidents and, and then we add the layer of great power competition. So I recall that in the 2020, election, candidate Biden and his entourage said that they did not consider the Middle East and arena for great power competition, they were somewhat dismissive of how significant the Russian and Chinese role in the region were at the time, they still asserted that the all the powers of the region, strongly preferred security cooperation with the United States. And maybe that reality has shifted and evolved to the point where a conceptual framing that makes it less likely that the countries in the region would be completely what's the word, you know, equal in their engagement with the great powers, and, you know, sort of compel them to make the United States premier into Paris? Like, Greg, I think that the countries, the two countries, we're talking about Israel and Saudi Arabia would be perfectly happy to get new commitments from the United States, and it wouldn't affect their policies towards Russia or China very much. They would insist on their freedom of action to pursue whether it's commercial, mercantile, you know, hedging their bets, whatever we're not going to need, we will not see either Israel or Saudi Arabia, somehow, you know, clearly distanced themselves from what are their interests with Russia and China, the Israelis are have deep relations with both countries, and yet are seen as the privileged partner of the United States. So it's, it's conceptually confusing. This moment we're in of whether the United States has kind of created an artificial construct that serves the US interests, but doesn't completely match up with our understanding of how these countries are likely to see their own interests.

**Steven Simon 17:53**

Let me just pose one follow up before turning to Trita. To the extent that concessions to the Palestinians by Israel are going to be part of this deal, in a, in a serious way. What is the likelihood that the Israeli government as it's currently constituted, could actually follow through? I mean, to me, this feels like the late 70s. And, you know, the insistence of the Carter administration on autonomy for Palestinians, as part of the Camp David Accords, and, you know, the Israelis, basically waving, waving that off, you know, the the whole impetus toward autonomy for Palestinians in the wake of the signature of the agreement, is that something that you see, would force see in this case?

**Steven Simon 19:15**

You're thinking. Well, that one's for you. Excuse me. Oh, I thought that was for you.

**Ellen Laipson 19:22**

Oh, I'm sorry. Run it by me again. I thought it was for Trita, sorry.

**Steven Simon 19:35**

Before turning to Trita, although I probably ask him a similar question. What's your thinking on the Israeli government's willingness to follow through? Thank you. Regarding the Palestinians in concessions to battle so

**Ellen Laipson 19:52**

To me, that's the easiest one. I don't think they have any interest. They will do some window dressing. But I think it's so deep in the logic of the coalition, that Bibi has assembled that you don't give anything to the Palestinians, and to the contrary, you're hardening Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. But more interesting is whether the Israelis actually have, you know, some misgivings about a closer us Saudi relationship. I would have thought that deep in the Israeli national security establishment is a belief that in a strategic sense, Israel's interests in Saudi Arabia's interests are not, you know, are not comfortably aligned. So I've been expecting not just that the Israelis, I mean, at this point, and you may have seen Tom Friedman's column, where he said, BB over to you everybody else's, you know, in the game, and you're just sitting there listening, you're not offering anything, whether the, for the Israelis, they're really not yet ready to, you know, to make any big offering to achieve this objective, whether it's there, because they see it, perhaps as the Biden administration feeling anxious to, you know, make this happen. And maybe there's not that much time pressure on the Israelis, the Saudis have been very clear that they're that they can also control the timing of this, depending on whether the Israelis offer appropriate and positive things, and whether the Palestinians themselves respond to the incentives and inducements that the Saudis are offering them.

**Steven Simon 21:36**

Right. Okay, let's move on to treat a Parsi. Two, we'll wrap up the panel presentations before we go to q&a. Treat up, I'd like to pick up on something that that both Greg and Ellen have raised, which is the question of US interests, and how those are implicated in the proposed deal. And and this seeming mismatch between the scope of the US prospective commitments under the deal to include a peace treaty, a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia, and the actual practical benefits of the proposed arrangement for the United States. Could you sort that out for us?

**Trita Parsi 22:33**

I wish I could, let me get just a shot at it. Because I agree with both Ellen and Greg. And I'm delighted to be on a panel with them. That this is indeed confusing if one is taking a look at it from a US perspective and trying to understand exactly what is driving this. And I think we have to separate out the issue of normalization and the concessions the United States would be making in the, at least in what has been reported that the administration is considering. Normalization in and of itself, I can definitely understand as to why US administration would think that this is one potentially transformative, something that will get their names written in the history books, as Greg mentioned, I think he said the n l cat on the wall, I can definitely understand that, from the perspective of what does this do to advance US interests? If you then add on to it these three buckets of concessions that are being considered a security pact, potentially Article Five NATO style security guarantees or a Japanese or Korean type of an agreement that is further than any US administration has ever gone when it comes to offering any form of security guarantees to any country in the in the GCC. Currently, the Qataris are the ones that have the highest level with the non-NATO ally status that they have. This is going to bring the United States deeper into the region, all talk about those, you know, reducing the footprint, the American public clearly doesn't want to see any more Americans drive into war in the Middle East. All of that which have been very critical issues in presidential elections have been winning cars in presidential elections is going to be reversed. Secondly, we're talking about granting the Saudis nuclear concessions that would undo the gold standard that the US had put in place with the 123 agreements, but also would have implications on the JCPOA. The administration came into the White House in 2021. And we're talking about a longer and stronger deal with Iran. They want to do a JCPOA plus at this point. You know, obviously that is not on the cards, but imagine that the United States finds a way to get back to the table and negotiate The demand is going to be to have a tougher JCPOA. If the United States at the same time has granted the Saudis enrichment capabilities with what likely is going to be far less severe and intrusive inspections, regime and restrictions, the likelihood that the Iranians are going to agree to a tighter JCPOA, when the Saudis got something far, far more loose, is just simply not there. And as a result, having conversations with regional officials from regional states recently on my trip there, there is a fear that this is going to lead to a situation in which Iran will go nuclear, the Saudis will as well, because the restrictions that will be imposed on them are not going to be anywhere near what is needed to make sure that 10 years down the road, they don't have a nuclear weapon. And that is going to leave the region. In a situation according to one official I spoke to from a very close ally of the United States into a situation in which Iran and Saudi Arabia are going to become Russia, and everyone else is going to become Ukraine have that in any way, shape or form can be considered to be worth the price for normalization is really beyond me. Again, if normalization happens without these concessions, it would be a very different story. But when we're adding these concessions in order to get this normalization, not only does it raise question as to how this advances US interest, but it also raises the question of why is this needed if normalization actually is good for Saudi Arabia and Israel, why is it needed for the United States to not only offer concessions or offer different level of concessions?

**Steven Simon 26:35**

I've got a quick follow up since you were just in Doha. Did any of your interlocutors their GCC interlocutors raise the question? Whether if such an agreement was reached, that as a defense treaty was reached between the United States and Saudi Arabia that they would want their defense cooperation agreements upgraded with the United States to match the US commitment to Saudi Arabia? And do you think that on the basis of what you've heard there, that the UAE, for example, would come to the United States and say, well, listen, we signed up for nuclear cooperation on the basis of one pair of 123. And, and we'd like to match, we'd like to be treated as well as Saudi Arabia in this regard. So let's renegotiate our nuclear cooperation agreement, did you hear anything along these lines in Doha?

**Trita Parsi 27:42**

Yes, I did. And I spoke to officials from several different GCC countries. Those conversations are taking place right now. We saw just a couple of days ago, that an agreement which with Bahrain was renewed, and it's essentially identical to the one from last year, but others are being considered are being discussed right now and will be concluded in the next couple of months. If the US offers a Japan or South Korea style agreement to Saudi Arabia, mindful of the fact that many of the smaller GCC states here are a threat, not just from Iran, but also from Saudi Arabia. And they don't have that level of agreement, which United States they will either seek it or seek it from elsewhere. And again, the question is, have we taken into account the implications of all of this, for the sake of normalization deal, which, incidentally, does not do anything to resolve the Israeli Palestinian issue? It just makes sure that the Saudis and the Israelis who already have a relationship will take that relationship out in the open. Is it worth it simply for that? I think you're on mute Steve.

**Steven Simon 28:59**

Thanks, Trita. That was great. Let's, let's go to audience Q&A shall we? We've got 30 minutes. And, and some good questions here. So I'm going to take them thus far in the order that they've they've come in. One is from Mohamed masari. A, given the recent agreement between Tehran and Riyadh, can Biden rely on making a balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia policy? That actually relates to an issue that you just raised Trita so why don't you take that one?

**Trita Parsi 29:41**

Sorry. Could you repeat the question if given the

**Steven Simon 29:45**

he says Mohammed says, given the recent agreement between Tehran and Riyadh, can Biden rely on making a balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia policy? In other words, I think what's being asked is a or is the attempt to de escalate with Iran inconsistent with the strengthening of relations as the administration conceives them with Saudi Arabia?

**Trita Parsi 30:14**

Yeah, I think it's a very important question. And I don't think one can say for certain how it will impact that the talks that is taking place. But I would make the argument that part of the reason why and incentive emerged on the Saudi side, to try to de escalate with Iran through diplomacy, which the Saudis did have opportunities to do earlier on, but didn't until after the Iranian attacks on the Saudi oil fields and Trump's failure to come to Saudi Arabia's aid from the Saudi perspective, realizing that they actually didn't have the type of captured launch from the United States, that they couldn't always hide behind American power, I think changed the incentive structure in Saudi Arabia, really making them realize that they do have to pursue the policy. Now, I think that has contributed not just to Saudi Arabia's incentive structure, but we have seen this intra regional, and particularly also intra Arab, the time taking place just in the last couple of years. If we then go back to offering Saudi Arabia not only security gadgetry, but stronger than ever before, are we potentially risking to disrupt this trend, this process right now? intralesional detente, particularly mindful of the fact that as Elon pointed out, this is an agreement that we'll be building on the Abraham accord that the Trump administration put in place Jared Kushner put in place. And Kushner, his document on this is very explicit. It says that any improvement of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Arab states is a challenge and a potential threats to the Abrams, meaning that for the Abrams record, not only to come into place, but also to be able to see be sustained, there needs to be sustained Arab Iranian enmity. Now, I don't think that that is necessarily the perspective of some of the Arab states. I don't think that Emiratis, for instance, wanted to sign on to be the front line in an anti Iran coalition, and Saudi Arabia Now, having done its deal with Iran through the Chinese is probably also not thinking about it this way. But if that is at least part of the thinking, behind the Abrams report, certainly part of the thinking on the Israeli side, one does have to wonder if that could end up becoming inconsistent with each other and as a result, potentially disrupt this regional detox, which ultimately, in my view, is really good for the United States. If the region is actually finding ways to resolve its own problems through diplomacy without necessarily adding a burden onto the United States. That's something that we should be applauding.

**Steven Simon 32:58**

Good points. Let's turn to Ellen.

**Gregory Gause 33:01**

Could I could I add something on that?

**Steven Simon 33:03**

Yes. By all means

**Gregory Gause 33:05**

I, like Trita, I think anything that lowers the temperature in the Gulf is a good thing. Because if if we still think that the Americans core interest in the Persian Gulf region, is the free flow of energy, the lowering of temperatures. Geopolitically helps that but I'm not optimistic that what the Saudis and the Iranians are embarked upon is going to lead very far. I, the geopolitical realities of the increase in Iranian influence throughout the region haven't changed much. And, and to me, the, you know, the, the signal that the Saudi Iranian rapprochement or lowering of temperatures, means something is Yemen, because really, the only outside force that has any influence on the Houthis is the Iranians. If if we see real movement towards some kind of settlement of the Yemen conflict, then I'll change my mind. But until then, I just don't think that we should take a pretty simple agreement to re establish diplomatic relations to be a change in in the regional, geopolitical picture.\picture.

**Ellen Laipson 34:32**

And if I could just bring in a sentence on the Israelis. I think it's another reason why the Israelis may slow roll this whole process. Maybe they're waiting for American administration that they like better, but for sure, the underlying logic for the Israelis of engaging with Saudi Arabia more directly is their shared worry about Iranian influence in the region and if they believe the Saudis are are kind of playing both sides or that the Saudis are off on a slightly different tangent, then it may erode Israeli confidence that this expansion of both us Saudi relations and Israel Saudi relations, it may, you know, erode their confidence that that's truly in Israel's interest. Now, there are certainly Israelis who quietly probably do support a lowering of temperatures and eat would even be willing to engage Iran themselves. But those are not the people in power.

**Steven Simon 35:32**

Yeah, so what's come out publicly, if I correctly and in in the past week or so maybe a little more than that is reporting to the effect that the Saudis have warned the Palestinians to keep their expectations low. First of all, when I think a bass was in Riyadh, or Jenna, to, to discuss these things with the with, with the Saudi counterparts in that, indeed, the reported Palestinian requests, or does it irata, in the context of an agreement, have been notably modest. Except with respect, I think, to the transfer of, of some power Palestinian territory from joint administration to Palestinian. So administration. This goes back to Oslo. So do you? Do you see this as an indication that at the end of the day, the Palestinian component of this normalization agreement will simply be window dressing and not entail any significant concessions? For whatever reason?

**Ellen Laipson 37:13**

So I do think it's, it's very, you know, extremely low likelihood that this would be that this so called transformation would be equally transformative for the Palestine question. I think that we're just not there. I think the Saudis themselves have low expectations that the Palestinians can kind of get their act together and become a credible representative that, you know, moves us back on to the story of statehood. But more importantly, the Israeli government has, you know, very clearly delineated a strategy for its expanded control of the West Bank that does not envision and statehood. So whether there's very minimalist, you know, acknowledgement that the Palestinians have some responsibilities for their own security, that's as far as we're gonna get, I think. And I think, and the Saudis are also trying to take the temperature of how much do young Saudis care about this MBS comes in, I think, and Greg, correct me if I'm wrong with an assumption that, you know, the Palestinian issue was important to an older generation, it's less important now. And so they're not going to do some really heavy lifting. It's to the bet to my understanding, they'd be thrilled if conditions were more favorable. But I just don't see the situation on the ground is providing much hope for that.

**Gregory Gause 38:36**

Yeah, I don't. I don't see. I don't see much hope either. But that's kind of my my normal stance in life. But I do think that it's a big question, Mark, just how much the Saudis want on the Palestinian side to be acceptable. I would just say that I think that we have some indication from the Crown Prince is earlier moves toward Israel, that that he is not committed to getting a big slice of the pie for the Palestinians. However, his father is still alive. And it was one of the few instances where the king kind of pulled back on NBS is, you know, direction of policy, when it looked back in the in at the end of the 20. Teens, like, there might be something brewing between between the Saudis and the Israelis. And, and, and the king really did kind of publicly Yank backwards. Now, how important that will be. Now, it's impossible for people outside of the palace to tell frankly, but I'd also say that there's a couple other things. There's this Nason UAE Saudi rivalry I don't want to overplay it gets, I think it gets a little too much play in some quarters, but there's something there. And and for for MBAs to be able to say I got more than the Emiratis, I think might be one of the elements in in his assessment of the of the Palestinian end of this four corner bank shot that we're talking about, you know, to get to get this deal. And I think that more than the Emiratis Saudi Arabia does have some public opinion that it wants to test this, as Ellen said, it's, I'm not saying that Saudi public opinion is directive or has a veto or anything like that, but but there's just more of of a public opinion than there is in the Emirates A country where, you know, fewer than 10% of the population are citizens. And so none of this should be taken as the Saudis are going to be the champions of, of Palestinian statehood going forward. But they do have the FOD plan and the Arab peace plan that they refer to as their basic documents on this. And so I don't think that they'd be willing to settle for kind of what the Emiratis got, as part of the Abraham accords. I think that probably want more.

**Trita Parsi 41:38**

Can I say something? Steve, just quickly? I agree with both Greg and Ellen. The question, though, is how much window dressing can the PA Sell to the Palestinian population and get away with it? The Abraham Accord has is in by no means popular amongst the Palestinian population, it's made their situation worse. Where is the breaking point? Are we nearing that this risk getting to that point, in terms of the PA collapsing and the takeover by Hamas, or Islamic Jihad in the West Bank, if, at the end of the day, there's nothing more than just slightly upgraded window dressing? I think Thomas Friedman's called him a couple of weeks ago in the New York Times talked about that the concession would be to keep the possibility of a two state solution alive. So we've gone far away from actually trying to achieve a two state solution, but to only keep the possibility of it alive. For how long can the Palestinian population, tolerate that with us, risking increased violence, etc, etc, things that a peace deal is actually supposed to make less likely, but here potentially make more likely?

**Steven Simon 42:58**

Yeah, I think that's an important point. Trita, I mean, it's so far as that the outbreak of renewed outbreak of violence, that would be accompanied by a robust Israeli military response in the West Bank and in Gaza would test any treaty arrangement between the United States and Saudi Arabia in the United States and an agreement between the Saudis and Israel in particular, because it could get very bad. And if it did, I think it would be the the optics of it, setting aside other more material factors, you know, would be would be very difficult to manage, I think, for the parties. So I got a question here from Josh Landis, which is one I think that you can all comment on, but it's kind of interesting. He says, How much does Saudi Arabia fear the United States and its ability to punish the kingdom for building closer relations with Russia and China? Will such a deal protect Saudi Arabia from future US sanctions? Who wants to jump in on that?

**Gregory Gause 44:17**

I think that the Saudis were faced with an administration when the Biden administration came to power that was pretty openly dismissive of them. And, you know, within a year, the United States was back, seeking better relations with them. You know, as much as Josh knows the region, I don't know if I can sign on with the idea that, that the primary driver here is the Saudis fear the US coming after them. But I do think that that Josh is, is on to something in that the thing that most American presidents care the most about in their relations with Saudi Arabia is oil prices, usually asking the Saudis to bring more oil onto the market to bring the price down, occasionally asking the Saudis to, to bring less oil on the market to bring the price down. But American presidents have always wanted to be able to call the ruler of Saudi Arabia and say, hey, can you do something for us on oil? I think that that's becoming less possible, just because the Saudis are so committed to the idea that they need a certain level of oil revenue, to paradoxically accomplish this move in their economy away from reliance on oil. And I, I just wonder if they if the ability to kind of use good political vibes between the US and Saudi Arabia will be enough to get the kind of oil cooperation that has happened somewhat frequently in the past?

**Steven Simon 46:08**

Anybody else on that?

**Ellen Laipson 46:11**

So I didn't know whether Josh's question implied that the Saudis would actually think we would punish them for their relations with China or Russia, you know, and sanction them. Now, that gets us the to the interesting question of are the are these Gulf countries, including Israel, enough on board of our Ukraine policy? You know, I mean, are we leveraging these countries and sort of prove to us that you're on our side when we think about world peace? And I think the Gulf countries have, you know, been quite careful about that, and the Israelis themselves, not wanting to, you know, wanting to help Ukraine on the one hand, but not to the level that it damages their relations with Russia. So it kind of gets us back to the great power overlay, if you will, of is that really what's at stake here? It various times. Blinken, in his own speeches, has said that, you know, we're not asking anybody to sever ties with China, we understand it's a big, complicated world, and et cetera. So I, I just don't think that we really have either the leverage or perhaps even the intention of asking countries outside of the Indo Pacific arena, to you know that even to the threat of saying we'll punish you if you maintain relations with China. So I think it's not the most plausible scenario of how the Saudis would fear us, they might fear our neglect or inattention. And then, you know, that we really should go back. I think, at some point, Steve, I'll let you decide when to this nuclear question, because one piece of the puzzle that we haven't thought about is the extended deterrence piece.

**Trita Parsi 47:52**

If I could just add one small point. I don't know if the agreement would provide Saudi Arabia with the protection that Josh is suggesting. But I think it would be fair to say that just the engagement on the issue for the Saudis to dangle, normalization has been tremendously impactful for the rehabilitation of MBs compared to where he was just a year and a half ago, in terms of his standing in the United States and Western at large. And also, with the normalization of the idea of certain concessions, Biden himself treated the idea of security guarantee as a non starter about a year ago. Now, apparently, that is being seriously considered. Same thing with other things, I mean, nuclear issue as well. So I think they may or dangling of this, even if it doesn't lead to anything has nevertheless still gained MBS significant benefits, both for his political rehabilitation as well as the normalization of the idea that, yes, Saudi Arabia is a country that the United States should seriously consider offering security guarantees.

**Steven Simon 49:07**

So okay, so speaking of the security guarantees, a couple of questions from our viewers. One is from Andrew Steinfeld, who used to he was a Foreign Service officer working in the Middle East. And his, his basic question is, as the United States ponders, you know, security guarantees for Saudi Arabia, what, what are American assumptions about the longevity of NBS is rule in Saudi Arabia because he could rule as Andrew points out for 50 years. And even though these kinds of agreements can be pulled out, have at any time with a years notice by any of the parties involved. It's still a pretty big, you know long term commitment if the assumption is that that NBS is going to be around for that long. What? Trita, what's your take on on the administration's thoughts here?

**Trita Parsi**

I don't know, I think perhaps Greg would be better positioned to answer that question when it comes to that specific aspect. But my own impression has been that the working assumption on the US side has been, the MBS is going to be there for the long haul, that they will see any particular threat to him from inside of Saudi Arabia. So that is the safest bet. The question, I think, is which MBS is it going to be? Is it going to be the MBS of the last year and a half that is trying to de escalate that is trying to end the war in Yemen trying to get out of that war? Or is it the MBS that kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister that cut off the head of Khashoggi or, you know, was bombard in Yemen? That question I think, is unresolved, you know, regardless of whether it's MBS here.

**Steven Simon 51:11**

Yeah. Well, I don't think that this personally, I don't think that those two images of MBS are necessarily mutually exclusive. Which is something probably to bear to bear in mind. In in the final few minutes that we have, I'm particularly interested, as are some of our viewers, in delving into the domestic politics in the United States of treaty ratification, if things get that for with Saudi Arabia, and I wanted to pull each of you on what you thought the politics would be like surrounding the administration's decision to send a treaty draft to the to the Senate for its advice and consent. And, and what the likely result will be, what the debate will be like and what the what the result will be. Let's start with Elon.

**Ellen Laipson 52:15**

So I don't know if you all remember, you know, some of the Senate debates over arms sales to Saudi Arabia where at a moment when the body politic in the US was more overwhelmingly pro Israeli, that has started to shift. And if I could just take a minute to share this polling that AP has usefully come out with this week. That said, only three in 10 Americans believe that Israel is an ally that shares US interests, the Republicans are in the 40s. The Dems are in the 20s, and it averages out to the 30s. Of, so that's quite an interesting shift of whether you could imagine a floor debate where the, you know, the automaticity of is this in Israel's interest is not necessarily going to be as automatic as it might have been in the past. And so I could imagine people coming alive on saying, Have the Saudis done enough for the Palestinians? Have they done enough to end the war in Yemen? Do we really trust them with, you know, NATO standard, access and equipment, etc? So I think the administration, you know, you could imagine this is like Obama and the JCPOA. Would it be better to do this as an executive agreement rather than a treaty because there's some degree of uncertainty of where the Senate would actually end up if they were given a chance to vent all their cumulative feelings about us Saudi relations. And by the way, they're out of practice. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee hasn't held any treaty hearings, even the formal protocols of how you vet a treaty, are really untested in this, you know, kind of feistier Congress that we experienced these days.

**Steven 54:05**

I know I think it's easily forgotten that a new mutual security treaty on the part of the United States in another country would itself be pathbreaking. Right, because we just haven't had anything like that we're out of practice. Yes. And we don't do that. Essentially. Well, maybe that's maybe that's changing. Greg, what's what's your take on the politics of this?

**Gregory Gause 54:32**

34 votes is what you need to squash a treaty a real treaty in the Senate. I can't imagine that, that you wouldn't have at least eight Republican senators voting no on this. Just from from, you know, you have you have a somewhat neo-isolationist element in the in the Republican Party stronger in the house. but but, you know, there are senators who who have been very vocal that that Saudi Arabia is not an ally of the United States. And on the Republican side, on the Democratic side, there's even more. You know, Senator Murphy from Connecticut leads, I think, a substantial part of the caucus on this. If you didn't have a very strong Israeli lobbying effort behind this, it would be doomed. But as Alan points out, even with a very strong Israeli lobbying effort, if it's led by Benjamin Netanyahu leading up the government that he's leading up now, even that might not be enough, it would be it would be a a real political gamble, and, you know, worthy of some of some Washington novels, you know, advising consent volume to, yes. There and there, we've lost everyone in the audience under 65 years.

**Steven Simon 56:02**

So, listen, just a follow up, Greg. Drawing on what Elon had had said about it being wiser for the administration to go forward with an executive agreement as against a treaty. And my question for you on this, Greg, is, will that be enough for the Saudis? Or will they just see it as just more much that the other smaller states have had to settle for?

**Gregory Gause 56:37**

That's a that's a great one. I think, in the end, and this is I'm I'm way out on a limb here. My guess is an executive agreement would be good enough for the Saudis. Okay, the fact that we don't do we don't do these treaties and

**Steven Simon 56:55**

Trita, domestic politics, what do you think?

**Trita Parsi 56:59**

First on Greg's last point, my understanding is a little bit different, although Greg obviously is the expert on Saudi Arabia, my understanding that in these talks to Saudis have insisted on a treaty precisely because of the larger perception of unreliability of the United States over the last couple of years and executive agreement is not strong enough for the Saudis to give the mother of all compromises and concessions. But on to the issue of domestic policies. I think, sadly, for President Trump, this may actually be up to President, President Biden, this may actually be decided by President Trump, even if he's even if this comes out right now. Because if Trump comes out strongly against this deal, he can probably rally more Republicans to his side in opposition to this deal than what other lobbies would be able to do in order to valid and in favor of Biden's. And so the question is what's in it for Trump to allow Biden to be able to say, I got a big bigger or better deal than you did? So I think the idea that this needs to be done before the elections because the Saudis are not going to be able to get it through. If it isn't, Biden, that is president and they need to have a Democrat there, etc. I'm not so sure that's going to work out the way they may have thought, because if Trump comes out strongly against this, he can rally most Republicans to vote against this deal. And again, he doesn't need that many.

**Steven Simon 58:32**

Yeah, it's also not really clear to me, I guess, at the end of the day, how many votes this a treaty would yield in a general election for the, you know, for the candidate who succeeded in pulling the deal off? You know, just, you know, which which voters vote on that basis? Probably not, not too many at the end of the day. Well, this was a fascinating discussion. And, and I'm sure it's just the first of many that we'll be having about this as as the diplomatic process moves forward. So thank you very much to our panel, Ellen, Greg and Trita, and look forward to you know, continuing conversation. Thank you.