**[A grand bargain?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768828/a-grand-bargain)**

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WHEN China brokered a [historic deal earlier this year](https://www.dawn.com/news/1741433) that normalised relations between long-time regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, it came as a huge setback — and challenge — for the Biden administration. The rapprochement left the US diplomatically marginalised in the Middle East and undermined several of its regional goals, most notably isolating Iran and normalising relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. By playing a mediatory role, China established itself as a major player and power broker in the Middle East, much to Washington’s discomfort. The US barely concealed its unease with this potentially game-changing development, which has already realigned relations among regional states and begun to transform the strategic landscape there.

Now the Biden administration is trying to get back in the game in the Middle East and contain growing Chinese influence there. President Joe Biden [acknowledged](https://www.dawn.com/news/1763893) that efforts are in progress for a deal with Riyadh aimed at establishing ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel. On July 28, he told donors at a fundraiser for his 2024 re-election bid, that “a rapprochement may be underway”. He did not reveal more. However, details about his new ‘plan’ were disclosed a day earlier in a [*New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/opinion/israel-saudi-arabia-biden.html) op-ed by Thomas Friedman, who had interviewed the president the previous week. According to him, the Biden administration was considering a “big Middle East deal”. This would involve Saudi Arabia normalising relations with Israel in return for a mutual security pact with the US, and Riyadh committing to provide a generous aid package to the Palestinians in the West Bank and scale back ties with China. Israel, for its part, would promise not to seize the West Bank, cease expansion of settlements there and re-commit to a two-state solution. The Palestinian Authority would have to reciprocate by supporting the Saudi-Israel peace deal.

The visit by a high-level US delegation to Saudi Arabia to meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman indicated that American officials were seeking to explore such a deal. White House officials were quoted as saying talks on July 27 between Saudi leaders and US national security adviser Jake Sullivan as well as Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk, discussed the possibility of a normalisation agreement although official statements by both sides did not mention this.

Several key questions are raised by what is being termed as Biden’s ‘grand bargain’ for the Middle East even though this is in an exploratory phase at present. Why is such a deal being considered now by the White House? What are its objectives? What are the chances of the deal being sealed? Would an agreement stick even if it is forged? First, the question of timing. Washington has long wanted to normalise Saudi-Israel relations especially after [several Arab states established ties with Israel](https://www.dawn.com/news/1579852) under the so-called Abraham Accords of 2020. Riyadh, reports suggest, drove a hard bargain and made several demands — a defence pact with the US, a civilian nuclear deal, missile defence system/other high-tech weapons and substantial Israeli concessions for the Palestinians. Clearly, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement disrupted whatever initial efforts were earlier in progress, while arguably enhancing Saudi Arabia’s bargaining power. But that development also gave urgency to US diplomatic efforts in order to restore its regional influence and leverage.

The US seeks to restore its position in the Middle East and contain China’s growing influence.

Timing may have much to do with the onset of the presidential election season as electoral dynamics begin to take over later this year and the focus shifts to domestic politics. The fact that Biden first publicly spoke about the deal at a fundraiser suggests he may also have an eye on its political dividends at home, especially as he has little to show by way of any foreign policy success. Facing a serious challenge in the election, a vulnerable Biden candidacy may need all the help it can get. At the same time, the move comes rather late in the day as such a complicated deal will need lengthy and difficult negotiations. Moreover, as Biden’s re-election is uncertain this casts doubt on the survivability of a deal even if it is concluded.

The multiple aims of a potential deal are apparent: re-establish America’s dominance in the region, reverse China’s diplomatic and economic gains, and reorder regional relationships to serve US and Israeli interests. Providing some relief to the Palestinians in the West Bank will also help to burnish US credentials and image among Arab and other Muslim countries even if Israel gets a better bargain out of this.

The chances for diplomatic success are slim as the challenges are formidable in complicated US-Saudi-Israeli-Palestinian negotiations among four parties. This is especially so at a time when doubts persist in the region about American reliability. Recently, new military deployments in the Middle East announced by Washington represented an effort to restore its credibility by showing its seriousness about re-engagement. Whether the various parties have enough confidence in the US and its ability to implement the deal to make necessary concessions is open to question, not least because America is on the cusp of a presidential election. The Saudi and Israeli governments may want to wait it out to see the outcome of the US presidential race before committing to any deal. Both have had troubled relations with the Biden administration in recent years.

Some foreign policy experts and former US officials see the ‘grand bargain’ idea as a “non-starter” or “far-fetched” while Friedman described it as “a long shot, at best”. The Saudis, Israelis as well as the Palestinians would have to make fundamental, politically tough concessions for negotiations to make headway. Whether the US still has sufficient leverage with all of them to secure these concessions is doubtful. Israel’s national security adviser has said the road to such a deal was “still too long” while the government’s far right ministers voiced opposition to any concessions to the Palestinians. Then there is the US Congress, where Republicans would hardly favour a defence pact with Riyadh, and Democrats seem unlikely to agree to a deal that does not guarantee a two-state solution and adequately protect Palestinian rights.

All this makes the chances of progress towards an agreement a remote possibility. But like politics, diplomacy is the art of the possible.

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