

Sabotaging Saudi-Israeli Peace - Baltimore Jewish Times

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David M. Weinberg (Via JNS.org)

By David M. Weinberg

New York Times columnist Tom Friedman and others on the far-left are seeking to scuttle normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. They will not tolerate any breakthrough in ties between the two countries during the tenure of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and certainly not until they get their long-groused-about Palestinian state.

In a recent nasty 6,000-word essay, Friedman compared the forward-looking bent of Saudi Arabia under its young leader Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman with the supposed backwardness of Israel under the nationalist-haredi coalition headed by Netanyahu.

Friedman called upon the Biden administration to play hardball with Israel and “only invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Oval Office if he will answer two questions: One, are you occupying the West Bank and committed to resolving its permanent status through negotiations with the Palestinians, or do you see Israel’s current control of the Palestinians as the permanent status, never to be changed? We need to know once and for all.”

“And two, are you committed to ensuring that any major changes to Israel’s court system will be implemented with broad public support to ensure political stability, because the US has a huge interest in its most important military ally in the region not descending into civil war over judicial reform?” Friedman added.

Friedman barked that “for the last 75 years Israel has been a trusted and vital strategic partner of the United States, but that was always based on shared interests and shared values. If those values aren’t shared any longer, we need to know that. We need to get behind those Israelis who want to preserve Israel as a democracy—and keep locking the White House gates to anyone who doesn’t.”

Picking-up on the radical rhetoric of parts of the Israeli opposition, Friedman is thrilled to insinuate that Israel is no longer a democracy that shares America's values. In fact, reading between the lines of his previous columns, you can feel Friedman's elation at Israel's supposed moral fall. You can sense the relief he feels from the need to support Israel.

Now, Friedman takes his animus one step further, applying a bludgeon to the nascent détente between the Jewish state and the most important country in the Arab and Islamic world. He is frightened that "by rewarding Bibi with the ultimate prize of diplomatic relations with Riyadh, the Saudis could cement Netanyahu's extremist coalition in power for years — without any Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in the West Bank."

Friedman would much rather that "the Saudis demand Israeli overtures to the Palestinians that would preserve the possibility of a two-state solution — and the hope that Israel could remain both democratic and Jewish — by forcing Netanyahu to choose between his extremist one-state allies and making history by opening relations with Saudi Arabia."

Simply put, Friedman prefers sandbagging Netanyahu and pumping runaway Palestinian statehood to breakthrough diplomacy that would transform the Mideast. He prefers promoting Mahmoud Abbas and the rickety Palestinian Authority to advancing America's regional strategic interests and Israel's core security interests. And as we know from his previous columns, he prefers another sellout U.S. deal with Iran to a win-win-win deal that draws the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia together.

Friedman remains blind (purposefully so, I believe) to the fact that blocking Saudi normalization with Israel (and holding back on a

courtesy visit in Biden's Washington for Netanyahu) until Israel concedes to maximalist Palestinian demands is a dead-end path for regional peace and stability. It is a recipe for another 100 years of unnecessary Arab-Israeli conflict, and would be yet another prize for the mullahs of Tehran.

Irony of ironies! It is not the Saudis who are placing Palestinian rights in the way of Saudi-Israeli rapprochement, but rather American pundits and politicians obsessed with the Palestinians (no matter how many wrongs the Palestinians commit).

Every serious interlocutor I know who has spent significant time in Riyadh in recent months will tell you that Saudi leaders no longer insist on Palestinian statehood as a condition for movement towards Israel. The Saudis realize, as did the Emiratis, Bahrainis and Moroccans, that current Palestinian leaders are incapable of compromising for peace — and they see no reason to be held back any longer by Palestinian rejectionism.

What the Saudis want are not the hackneyed exhortations and stale formulas related to Palestinians fostered by Tom Friedman and his ilk. What they need are concrete understandings with Washington on security and economic matters, and partnership with Israel.

Friedman's sour and rejectionist writings are characteristic of the reluctance of progressives to fully embrace the Abraham Accords. Alas, many still consider the Accords a Trump-tainted gimmick or a Netanyahu-stained end-run around the Palestinians, and not an authentic breakthrough for peace and security in the Middle East.

It is hard for them to swallow the fact that Arab countries are bandwagoning with Israel because Arab leaders view Israel as a force for good, knowledge, prosperity and stability in the Middle East.

It is even harder for the extremists among them to accept the blunt refutation inherent in the Abraham Accords of the ongoing Palestinian campaign to deny and criminalize the Jewish people's historic rights in Israel.

And the Biden administration? Sadly, it has spent the past three years sitting on the sidelines of this historic transformation.

Instead of embracing the Abraham Accords early on and investing in their expansion, the administration has effectively sabotaged them. It has prioritized a renewed nuclear deal with Iran while beating up on Israel and Saudi Arabia for their democratic and/or human rights deficits.

For a while, Biden's aides even refused to speak the term "Abraham Accords." Only now is the administration talking about appointing a special envoy to drive expansion of the Accords, and only because the Saudis have effectively threatened to bolt their alliance with West.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has cozied-up to Qatar, which sits securely in Iran's regional camp, even extending non-NATO major ally status to Doha. And it seems hellbent once again on foolishly cutting a sweetheart deal with the mullahs of Iran.

This may involve the release of \$10 billion or more in frozen Iranian assets and clemency for Iran's near-breakout nuclear advances of recent years in exchange for the Iranian release of American hostages and warmed-over Iranian promises to freeze their atomic bomb program. In short, more American goodies for Iran in exchange for more pious and empty Iranian pledges.

U.S. policy must change, and not in the way Tom Friedman wants. Despite "Trumpian residue" on the Abraham Accords and Palestinian dissatisfaction with the Abraham Accords dynamic — things that

clearly bother Biden's people — and even though Saudi-Israeli ties would be a political win for Netanyahu — something that clearly bothers Biden's people — doubling-down on the Accords should be a priority U.S. foreign policy goal, a “no brainer.”

Expansion of the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia might even bring peace with the Palestinians closer. It would emphatically signal to the Palestinian leadership that the time to compromise with Israel has come. Perhaps Mohammed bin Salman might be able to convince the Palestinians to accept the Jewish people's historic rights in Israel and reach an amicable settlement.

For this and so many other reasons, Biden administration officials and mainstream Democrats in Congress ought to move beyond their Trump traumas, Netanyahu antipathies and Iran illusions to get behind the Abraham Accords, bringing Riyadh into the regional peace revolution.

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