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Joe Biden 'risks setting off nuclear arms race with Saudi-Israel deal'

A former British ambassador said 'the ramifications for nuclear proliferation in the Middle East are huge'

By Edmund Bower

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The US risks setting off a new nuclear arms race in the Middle East with its proposed normalisation deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, a former British ambassador to Riyadh has warned.

Joe Biden's administration is working keenly on a package of agreements that would see Saudi Arabia formally recognise Israel's nationhood, becoming the biggest Arab power to

do so since the Jewish state was founded in 1948.

Riyadh has made US assistance with its civil nuclear programme a key demand of the talks.

Under the terms of the deal, the Wall Street Journal reported last week, US and Israeli officials are discussing a potential US-run uranium enrichment centre on Saudi soil.

It would make Saudi Arabia the second Middle Eastern country to enrich uranium after Iran, which declared in July 2022 that it had reached nuclear threshold status.

In an interview with Fox News last month, Saudi Arabia's de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman said that if Iran builds a nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia would follow suit: "If they get one, we have to get one."

Sir John Jenkins, the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 2012 to 2015, told The Telegraph that Mr Bin Salman's comments to Fox show he has the ambition to build a bomb and that the risk of regional nuclear proliferation has become "acute".



Joe Biden's administration is working keenly on a package of agreements that would see Saudi Arabia formally recognise Israel's nationhood | CREDIT: KEN CEDENO/Reuters

If Riyadh acquired a bomb, Sir John said, "the Egyptians would do the same. I'm absolutely sure. And what about Turkey? The ramifications for nuclear proliferation in the Middle East are huge."

And given the tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, "it's very hard to predict what the Iranian response would be".

Saudi Arabia last week agreed to tougher checks by the UN's nuclear oversight organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency, which could be a sign the kingdom is advancing in its ambitions.

"It shows that it's moving and moving fast," said Yoel Guzansky, a former member of Israel's National Security Council. "I'm sure this was an American condition [of any deal to boost Saudi Arabia's nuclear industry]".

Defenders of the proposals say that Washington will maintain oversight over a "nuclear Aramco" with tough checks to prevent its use for military purposes. But Mr Guvasky said: "We learned in Iran that these things don't work", adding that political unpredictabilities make it impossible to assure long-term US control over a Saudi nuclear programme.

Several Israeli politicians and military leaders have expressed fears that prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is putting regional stability at risk in pursuit of his own political interests.

A former director of Israeli military intelligence told The Telegraph that negotiators should "think twice about the consequences" of extending nuclear support to Saudi Arabia.



Israeli politicians and military leaders have expressed fears that prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is putting regional stability at risk | CREDIT: Reuters

One source with knowledge of the negotiations said that Washington may be compromising on long-standing positions meant to prevent nuclear proliferation in order to secure a foreign policy 'win'.

Backers of Mr Biden's deal say US nuclear assistance to Riyadh will cement it as an ally, while Russia and China lurk in the background.

Riyadh and Beijing have long discussed the prospect of nuclear cooperation.

In August, Saudi officials told reporters that they were considering a new Chinese bid to build a nuclear power plant in the kingdom's eastern province.

The Americans are "being blackmailed by Mohammed bin Salman", said Emmanuel Navon, the Israeli CEO of the European Leadership Network. "The Biden administration is willing to pay any price to move China away from the Gulf."

Similarly, Mr Navon said that nine "disastrous" months of government by Mr Netanyahu, in which he has faced mass protests over his weakening of the independence of Israel's judiciary, mean he too "is willing to pay any price for a deal to be signed. He's desperate for some type of achievement."

Mr Netanyahu's office declined to comment.

While analysts agree that a normalisation deal is becoming more likely, it could still be months or years away. The Palestinian issue remains a stumbling block, as do Saudi requests for far-reaching security commitments from the US.

"The Saudis are saying: 'If you want normalisation, this is the price,'" Sir John said. "And the price is extremely high. So how much do you want it?"

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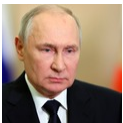
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