

Flames and smoke billowing in Gaza following Israeli strikes on Monday. Scores have been killed on both sides since Hamas attacked Israel over the weekend. It is becoming clear that one major motivation for Hamas' attack was to disrupt the Israel-Saudi normalisation process, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS



Has Hamas violence wrecked Israel and Saudi Arabia rapprochement?

National interest will dictate the pace of normalisation in the long run, no matter what Hamas throws at it.

Carl Skadian

The latest upsurge of violence in the Middle East has put the brakes on prospects for the normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi recognition of Israel would have been part of a series of shifts in the region that were prompted by larger trends which have now been delayed, but not reversed: In the affairs of states, national interest trumps everything else.

Since the Abraham Accords hit the headlines in 2020, many had posed the question: Would there be a Saudi rapprochement with Israel? Mediated by the United States, the Abraham Accords are bilateral agreements on the normalisation of ties signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco

and Sudan.

Initially, the answers in so far as Saudi Arabia was concerned took the same form – it was an idea whose time had not yet come, particularly since the kingdom is the guardian of the holy places.

Over the past three years, there were some signs that something was afoot. In late 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in Neom, the futuristic techno-city in Saudi Arabia that has symbolised MBS' plans for his kingdom. The absence of more concrete moves in the aftermath of that meeting meant the issue receded from view. But earlier in 2023 came news that a deal was indeed being discussed. Many remained sceptical, dismissing the idea as too far-fetched.

Several events over the last few weeks, though, indicated otherwise. On Sept 19 came news that the US was discussing terms of a mutual defence treaty with Saudi Arabia that would resemble the pacts it has with Japan and South Korea. An agreement under which the US would commit to Saudi defence was apparently a key demand of Riyadh's in exchange for normalisation.

More eye-opening were MBS' remarks during a rare interview in English with Fox News. Though he made the usual noises about the Palestinian question, two

things stood out: First, he said Saudi Arabia and Israel were getting closer to a deal "every day". Second, he said the kingdom's aim was to "ease the life of the Palestinians" – a very broad framing that could have meant anything, including a massive cash injection, which Riyadh could afford without batting an eyelid.

Perhaps the strongest signal that the gears were turning was visits by Israeli ministers to Saudi Arabia for the first time, and a trip that the Saudi envoy to the West Bank, which entailed him passing through an Israeli border checkpoint.

All hell has now broken loose following Hamas' massive attack on Israel on Oct 7, during which the militant group launched thousands of rockets on Israel, breached security borders and took hostages. Scores have been killed on both sides since then, with Israel declaring war, and violence has ratcheted up.

It is becoming clear that one major motivation for Hamas' attack was to disrupt the Israel-Saudi normalisation process. Hamas clearly wants to make the Palestinian issue front and centre, again, for Arab populations and leaders. Concerned that its own relevance is receding along with that of Palestine, the group resorted to violence – even though those that

will bear the brunt of retaliation will be the very people it governs. This should not come as a surprise: The welfare of its people has always been a secondary consideration for Hamas. Iran, which has been vocal against normalisation, reportedly had a hand in planning the latest operation.

POINTS TO PONDER

Where does this leave Saudi-Israel normalisation, and what are the takeaways for Singaporeans? It is important to note that a deal serves the US and Israeli national interest in relatively straightforward ways. Getting the Arab world's most influential power to normalise ties with Tel Aviv has obvious rewards. Examining what is in it for the Saudis is more instructive. Apart from a defence treaty, the kingdom is reportedly also seeking US aid to develop a civilian nuclear programme. In the Fox interview, MBS cautioned that if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, the Saudis will "have to" get one, too. A civilian nuclear programme is seen by many as a pathway to a military one.

A deal for Riyadh, then, is more about its security vis-a-vis Iran than any other issue, including the Palestinians. Though Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a much-ballyhooed agreement to restore

ties earlier this year, there is little doubt that deep mistrust remains between the two. Even a relatively innocuous football game can spark trouble: Just last week, a Saudi club refused to play a game with an Iranian side in Isfahan. The reason? A bust of the slain former commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major-General Qassem Soleimani, was on display in the stadium. Paradoxically, any Iranian involvement in the Gaza violence will only entrench the Saudi view of the threat from Teheran.

A second reality that Singaporeans must absorb is that the Palestinian issue has receded in importance for Arab and Muslim leaders in the Middle East. A big reason for this is the ineptitude of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which have not only failed to seize perfectly good opportunities to improve the lot of those they govern, but have, in fact, made things worse for them. Hamas' latest action is no doubt aimed at reversing this trend. But the massive retaliation it has invited will only deepen Palestinian misery. Apart from offensive military operations, Israel has imposed a siege on Gaza, cutting off food, water, electricity and gas. The permits that allow thousands to work in Israel also hang in the balance. If anything, the Abraham

Accords underlined this reality, and acted as a proof-of-concept. Despite an expected backlash against Arab rulers for the so-called "betrayal" of Palestinians, nothing happened.

To be sure, even before the weekend's violence, there were several major obstacles in the way of an Israel-Saudi Arabia normalisation, including the fact that a mutual defence treaty between Washington and Riyadh would almost certainly be off the books.

Given the current polarised domestic environment in the US, there is little that politicians on either side of the aisle can agree on. The ouster of Speaker Kevin McCarthy on Oct 3 and rising tide of Republican opposition to further aid for Ukraine underline just how fractured America is now. Approval for a mutual defence treaty requires a super-majority in the US Senate, which is high impossible now. One might as well wish for world peace.

But a treaty is one thing, an agreement that the White House can sign off on is quite another. One need not have to delve into the history books for a blueprint: On Sept 13, the US and Bahrain signed a defence and economic cooperation agreement. With some tweaks, such a deal might be palatable to Riyadh and, given the lack of daylight between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, it could even be considered a dress rehearsal.

Another issue to consider is the Israeli government, the most extreme in the country's history. Normalisation will require at least token concessions to the Palestinians, something that some elements in the current coalition deem odorous. However, the Hamas attacks have galvanised talk of a national unity government. It is not

inconceivable that Mr Netanyahu could now ditch his far-right coalition in favour of an alliance with his erstwhile foes, Mr Yair Lapid and Mr Benny Gantz.

At the end of the day, the real sticking point in normalisation is not the Palestine issue – although it can be a fig leaf for the Saudis if they decide they are not getting enough bang for their buck. It is whether the US is willing to budge on the mutual defence pact and on the nuclear issue. But, as mentioned earlier, there is a workaround for the former. And, on the latter, the 123 Agreement between the US and India in 2005 provides the basis to take things forward.

All these obstacles are pitched against an onrushing tide: It is in the national interest of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US for a normalisation deal to be sealed. There will be further twists and turns in this saga, as the latest violence has shown, but the prospects for a deal have only been damaged, not destroyed.

Stranger things have happened in the pursuit of national interest – a fundamental tenet in relations between states. It is a reality that Singaporeans must expect, and accept.

• Carl Skadian is senior associate director at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.