

# Saudi envoy says kingdom 'absolutely' still open to normalization deal with Israel

But Prince Khalid bin Bandar, Riyadh's ambassador to UK, tells BBC ties can only be formed if a Palestinian state is established, after Blinken says 'clear interest' remains

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Saudi Ambassador to the UK Khalid bin Bandar bin Sultan al-Saud walks in the Houses of Parliament in London on December 19, 2019. (Adrian DENNIS / POOL / AFP)

Saudi Arabia is still interested in pursuing a normalization deal with Israel after its war against Hamas in Gaza ends, an envoy from the Gulf nation said Tuesday.

Prince Khalid bin Bandar, the Saudi ambassador to the UK, told the BBC in a [radio interview](#) that Riyadh is still open to establishing ties with the Jewish state as long as it is part of an overall two-state solution.

“Absolutely there’s interest, there’s been interest since 1982 and before,” Bandar said of reaching a deal with Israel. “We’ve been at this for a long time, and willing to accept Israel for a long time, it’s a reality that’s there that we have to live with. But we can’t live with Israel without a Palestinian state.”

Bandar said that pre-October 7, “the discussions had been going on for quite some time. I’m not at liberty to go into the details of what was discussed, but it was close, there was no question.” He said that for Riyadh, “the final endpoint definitely included nothing less than an independent state of Palestine. And while we still — going forward, even after October 7 — believe in normalization, it does not come at the cost of the Palestinian people.”

Israel and Saudi Arabia were widely believed to be close to inking a historic normalization deal just before the Hamas onslaught of October 7, in which thousands of members of the terror group stormed across the border and murdered some 1,200 people in Israel, taking another approximately 240 hostage.

In response, Israel launched an extensive war against Hamas in Gaza, in which more than 22,000 people in the Strip have died so far, according to unverified figures from the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, which do not differentiate between civilians and terrorists.

The IDF says it has killed more than 8,500 Hamas operatives in Gaza, in addition to some 1,000 terrorists inside Israel on October 7. More than 180 IDF soldiers have been killed in the ground operation.

The growing death toll in the now three-month-old war has brought Israel heavy criticism from even some of its closest allies, as the international call for a ceasefire has grown, while Israeli leaders continue to insist they will not stop fighting until Hamas is wiped out from the Strip.

Asked if Hamas can be a part of a future Palestinian state, Bandar largely deflected, saying that “there’s always room for change if you have optimism and hope, but when there’s a conflict, the first thing you have to recognize is that both sides have lost. And when both sides lose, both sides are then willing to compromise. And if there’s no compromise there’s no solution.”

He criticized the “extreme absolutist perspective” he said has long characterized the conflict, and added that in post-war Gaza, the Palestinian Authority must play a role — something the Israeli government has rejected — but “almost certainly it will require international involvement” to stabilize the Strip, “and without question you can’t do it without the Israelis accepting it, so the big stopping point to this is Israel, not everyone else.”

Bandar’s comments came just a day after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Saudi oasis town of Al Ula, where both figures appeared to indicate that normalization talks were still possible.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in a tent in the Saudi oasis town of Al Ula, on January 8, 2024. (Saudi Press Agency)

“There’s a clear interest in the region in pursuing that, but it will require that the conflict end in Gaza and it will also clearly require that there be a practical pathway to a Palestinian state,” Blinken told reporters on Monday before he departed the kingdom for Israel.

The Saudi crown prince, the kingdom’s de facto ruler, stressed the importance of stopping the hostilities in Gaza and forming a path for peace, Saudi state news agency SPA reported. It said the crown prince underscored the need to restore stability and to ensure the Palestinian people gain their legitimate rights.

According to a Hebrew media report on Tuesday, the US is floating the Arab Peace Initiative that Saudi Arabia sponsored more than 20 years ago as a possible framework to end the war against Hamas in Gaza.

The unsourced Channel 12 report said that the Biden administration is now bringing up the initiative with Israel, arguing that such an agreement would be in the interest of the US, Israel and the rest of the region.

The 2002 initiative offers Israel normalized ties with the entire Arab world once it reaches a two-state solution to its conflict with the Palestinians.

Blinken is currently in Israel on his third leg of a Mideast tour aimed at heading off a wider conflagration in the region as fighting with Hezbollah on Israel’s northern border intensifies.

In his meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, Blinken “stressed the importance of avoiding further civilian harm and protecting civilian infrastructure in Gaza,” according to the State Department.

*Reuters and Times of Israel staff contributed to this report.*