

**Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel**

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**Saudi Arabia is gradually changing its attitude toward Israel, laying the groundwork for a process that could culminate in full bilateral relations. Saudi Arabia's economic, religious, and political importance gives Israel an interest in achieving a normalization agreement with the kingdom, as long this would not result in the erosion of Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). Riyadh, however, has various internal and external constraints, as well as a set of particular sensitivities. For Saudi Arabia, the question of relations with Israel relates primarily to the kingdom's internal stability and regional status. It is quite possible that at the present time, full normalization with Israel is perceived as one step too far. This does not mean, however, that preparations are not underway for such an agreement, especially with regard to public opinion, which is still mostly opposed to normalization with Israel, including piecemeal measures tantamount to "creeping normalization." In any case, when considering an agreement, Saudi Arabia will presumably seek to test two principal parameters: the success and expansion of the Abraham Accords and improvement in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Additional factors likely to encourage normalization are a US agreement to sell advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia and internal changes in the kingdom.**

As part of the momentum toward peace and normalization agreements between Israel and countries in the Gulf and Africa, Saudi Arabia's economic, religious, and political importance gives Israel an interest in achieving a similar agreement with the kingdom. Riyadh, however, has various internal and external constraints, as well as a set of particular sensitivities. The price of normalization with the kingdom is likely to be higher than with the other Gulf states, and it is therefore unclear when and under what conditions Saudi Arabia will be willing to sign an agreement in the style of the Abraham Accords. This article analyzes the opportunities and challenges for the kingdom in the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and examines the significance and likelihood of such an agreement.

Saudi Arabia's support for the Abraham Accords shows how far it has departed from its previous position. Its support is reflected in the permission granted to Israeli aircraft to fly in Saudi airspace to and from the UAE and Bahrain, the relatively positive coverage and

commentary about Israel in the many state-owned Saudi media, and remarks by leading current and past officials in the kingdom. Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan [stated recently](#) that normalization of relations between the two countries was inevitable. Saudi Arabia is no longer muting its criticism of both the past and present Palestinian leadership, and like Israel, blames the Palestinians for the lack of progress in the peace process. Bin Farhan emphasized, however, that the kingdom's still conditions normal relations with Israel on a resolution of the Palestinian issue based on the Arab Peace Initiative.

Relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia have developed along a number of parallel channels over the years: the security-intelligence channel, which still constitutes a firm, albeit narrow, foundation for relations that have necessarily remained covert; an economic-commercial channel, also not public; and in recent years, a channel focusing on an interreligious dialogue. Together with the secrecy that has characterized most of these channels, more open ties have also developed over time. These now include meetings between leading figures on both sides, mainly those who formerly served in official positions, and exchanges of public messages. Despite denials by senior Saudi officials, it is likely that the negotiations and agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan took place with the knowledge and support of at least part of the Saudi leadership. Overall, the agreements signed with these countries serve the kingdom's interests, and provide it with a barometer that it can use to weigh possible benefits and risks to a possible agreement with Israel, including the public reactions..

### **Challenges to Normalization**

Saudi Arabia's leadership appears to be divided on the issue of normalization. While past and current Saudi leaders are making pragmatic pronouncements about Israel, it appears that King Salman is adhering to a more traditional view on Israel and the Palestinian issue. In his [speech](#) to the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Salman again linked normalization with Israel to Israel's meeting a series of conditions based on the parameters of the Arab Peace Initiative. The different messages heard from the Saudi leadership on the issue may reflect the kingdom's interest in preserving enough room to maneuver in order to enable it either to retreat from or advance toward normalization, depending on circumstances and conditions. The likelihood of normalization with Israel will increase after King Salman dies, and certainly if his son, Crown Prince Mohammed (MBS), is appointed king. The issue of normalization with Israel will presumably be affected by MBS's understanding of the extent to which such a measure is liable to interfere with his appointment, which in any case must win internal legitimacy.

Beyond internal politics is the question how open Saudi Arabia's conservative society is to an agreement with Israel. In recent years, Saudi society has been able to accept substantial

social and economic changes with limited public criticism. This does not mean, however, that a peace agreement with Israel will receive such support. At the same time, normalization could derive support from recent structural changes in the kingdom, including the structure and composition of the Saudi Consultative Assembly (Shura Council) and the Council of Senior Scholars. Such changes are likely to make it easier for the kingdom's royal house to act with more flexibility in taking such far-reaching measures.

The Saudi royal house has made no secret of its desire to change the country's internal discourse, including its religious discourse. Religion plays a key role in the kingdom's rhetoric, in part as a means for the authorities to influence sentiment and gain popular support. MBS is expected to continue utilizing the state-budgeted religious establishment to rebuff opposition, and to attempt to pave the way for controversial political measures, including normalization with Israel. There are indications that a [more tolerant](#) attitude toward Jews and Judaism has been adopted, in order to test popular response, but also to enable messages of normalization and coexistence to penetrate public discourse. The negative responses to this effort have come primarily from Saudis in exile, most of whom oppose the regime, and not from residents, who are afraid to openly express opinions that contradict the government's position.

Another challenge involves maintaining the kingdom's status in the Muslim world. This objective, which is a supreme interest for Riyadh, is liable to be damaged by criticism from parties such as Turkey and Iran seeking to adopt the Palestinian cause and use it to attack the kingdom. Saudi Arabia is competing in the Muslim world against those eager to challenge its status, and an agreement with Israel is liable to have a negative impact on its ability to compete. Due to the kingdom's status in the [Muslim world](#), a normalization agreement is especially valuable for Israel, which hopes such an agreement will facilitate better relations with the entire Muslim world.

### **Fruits of Normalization**

Establishment of official relations with Israel will help Saudi Arabia realize a number of strategic objectives. First, in recent years, the Saudi elite has come to doubt the willingness of the United States to stand by it when its essential interests are at stake. The kingdom has a clear interest in having Washington deeply involved in the Middle East and being more committed and sensitive to Saudi interests, particularly where Iran is concerned. Riyadh regards an agreement with Israel as a means of strengthening its ties with the United States. It is possible that Saudi Arabia is holding back until after the US elections, so that it will have something to offer Joe Biden, if he is elected. Strengthening relations with the US is a supreme Saudi interest, and success in doing so could affect the internal status of MBS.

Second, Saudi Arabia believes that an agreement with Israel is likely to improve its international image and status, including in the US Congress, which has been damaged in recent years by several of the kingdom's actions. This matches Saudi efforts to market "moderate Islam" as part of its ongoing modernization process. Some of the other possible advantages for Saudi Arabia of an agreement with Israel could be obtained without public announcement of bilateral ties. Public connections, however, enable easier access to Israeli technology, for example, and may also strengthen Saudi Arabia's status vis-à-vis the Islamic holy sites in Israel. Increased Saudi anxiety about Iran is likely to be a factor motivating the kingdom to move toward rapprochement with Israel, not necessarily via the signing of a formal agreement, just as it can also be a deterrent against closer relations.

### **Significance for Israel**

For Saudi Arabia, the question of relations with Israel hinges on the kingdom's stability and status. It is likely that at the present time, a full normalization agreement with Israel is perceived as one step too far. This does not mean, however, that preparations are not underway for such an agreement, especially in shaping public opinion, which is still mostly opposed to normalization with Israel. To the extent that the kingdom feels that it is able to oversee and control the public discourse, it will feel more confident about taking measures toward rapprochement with Israel.

The Abraham Accords set a base threshold on several matters, and it is therefore likely that Riyadh's demands will be higher than those of Abu Dhabi. First of all, if the Israel-UAE agreement halted the Israeli plan to annex territories in the West Bank, then the Saudi terms could include even stronger demands from Israel on the Palestinian issue. Furthermore, the UAE is demanding access to advanced American weapons, including the F-35 stealth fighter, and it is possible that Saudi Arabia's demands in this sphere will be higher than those of the UAE – possibly even extending into the nuclear realm.

The Gulf states' position on Israel is dynamic, changing over time, with concessions on the conditions of the Arab Peace Initiative. It is therefore possible that Riyadh's adherence to the terms of the Arab Peace Initiative as a basis for negotiations is useful not only for maintaining the kingdom's stability and status, but also as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the United States on the terms for normalization.

The bottom line is that Saudi Arabia is taking cautious, gradual steps toward normalization of relations with Israel that are tantamount to "creeping normalization." In weighing the constraints and advantages, it is difficult to determine when and under what conditions the kingdom will be willing to join the Abraham Accords, but the possibility can certainly not be ruled out. On the way to an agreement, Saudi Arabia will seek to test two principal parameters: the success and expansion of the Abraham Accords and improvement in

relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel's willingness to take steps to advance the peace process will be of assistance regarding these parameters and enhance the possibility that Saudi Arabia will eventually normalize the bilateral relations. Additional favorable factors could include a US agreement to sell advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia, and internal changes in the kingdom regarding Israel's improved status in public opinion and who will inherit the Saudi throne.