

The Road to Normalization: Relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia

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The possible normalization of Israel-Saudi relations is once again making headlines, following emerging signs of readiness in the United States to promote this matter. Progress depends on several variables, led by, relations between the US and Saudi Arabia, and relations between the US and Israel. Partial normalization between Jerusalem and Riyadh is possible in certain circumstances, even without a full Israeli-Palestinian political settlement, provided the Saudis receive what they consider to be due compensation from the United States. However, while Riyadh looks to the United States as the main source of recompense, they must still show that they have gained something from Israel in the Palestinian context. Meanwhile, Israeli government policy on the Palestinian front should create suitable conditions for progress along the Israeli-Saudi channel.

In recent years there has been a gradual but perceptible change in Saudi attitudes toward improving relations with Israel, as shown by statements as well as by actions on the ground, in a trend of so-called "[creeping normalization](#)." The assessment is that Saudi Arabia has made a strategic decision to promote contacts with Israel with terms and circumstances that suit it, although the matter was not of high priority in the Kingdom. On the Israeli side, the government set itself an ambitious target at the start of its term – a peace treaty with Saudi Arabia as a continuation of the Abraham Accords. In recent months there have also been signs of positive changes in United States attitudes toward an Israeli-Saudi arrangement and the feasibility of greater US involvement in its attainment. The extent of the administration's ability to respond to Saudi demands in return for normalization with Israel is still not clear, partly because of different priorities and the difficulties that characterize Riyadh's relations with the current US administration.

The Current Situation

A gradual – if slow process – of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia has been underway for some time. Riyadh has taken a strategic decision to move cautiously toward improved relations with Israel. Indeed, in recent years there has

been slow movement toward more openness in these relations, as shown by statements and actions on the ground designed to test the waters and gradually accustom Saudi public opinion to possible closer relations with Israel in the future, given acceptance of its conditions for progress.

For the Kingdom, caution on all aspects of normalization with Israel is essential, partly because of its status in the Muslim world, its status in the Arab world, anti-Israel sentiment among the Saudi public, and the country's religious and conservative character. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has an interest in improving its relations with Israel and the dividends it can obtain on this account, particularly from the United States. As a result, the assessment is that there will be relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but not on the Abraham Accords model – the process will advance at a slower pace and with different parameters than those governing Israel's relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, for example, and in view of the Kingdom's specific and particular sensitivities.

The basis for growing closeness between Israel and Saudi Arabia over the last two decades is their similar (though not identical) perception of the strategic environment, and above all, their shared concerns about Iran's growing power. The similar Saudi and Israeli security needs will continue to be the main driver of rapprochement, although other elements are required for fully open relations. The growing Iranian threat and Saudi doubts over US security support for the Kingdom have encouraged channels of dialogue between Riyadh and Tehran and the renewal of official relations between their countries. For the Saudis, the move is intended to appease Iran to reduce the danger of conflict with it. Iran is therefore also a factor in relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as a challenge to the progress of such relations. Indeed, renewed relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are to some extent harmful to Israel's attempts to establish an anti-Iran camp in the region. Nevertheless, the renewed relations are not in themselves a barrier to future normalization with Israel. It appears that security ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel have actually increased Tehran's interest in reducing the tensions with Riyadh.

The Gulf states in general are worried about a possible conflict between Israel and Iran, and seek to distance themselves from the line of fire as much as possible, to avoid being seen as belonging to an anti-Iranian camp that includes Israel. Indeed, Iranian threats against the Emirates [have grown stronger](#) since the Abraham Accords were signed, and this could undermine the motivation of the Gulf states to reveal aspects of their relations with Israel. However, it is thought that US gestures toward Saudi Arabia regarding Iran (securities and weapons) will make it

easier for the Saudis to move toward Israel, i.e., “normalization in exchange for (protection from) Iran.”

For some time there have been quiet security relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. This security channel was the basis for the gradual development of more open relations, but it will continue even without such openness due to shared security interests. As a rule, secret elements in the relations between the countries should be distinguished from more public elements, which in recent years include inter-faith dialogue; Saudi recognition of the Holocaust; promotion of tolerance and changes in textbooks (particularly with reference to antisemitic discourse); public meetings between former senior figures from both sides, mainly at international conferences; more pragmatic statements about Israel from Saudi officials; more positive coverage of Israel and the Abraham Accords in Saudi media (including publication of articles by veteran Israeli writers on Saudi websites, and vice versa); more critical attitudes toward the Palestinian Authority; permission for Israeli aircraft to fly over Saudi Arabia; and de facto relaxation of the conditions for doing business with Israelis.

For their part, Israeli governments have not hidden their desire for a normalization agreement with the Saudis, and some have also tried [to recruit](#) the United States to the effort. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [declared](#) his goal of achieving peace with Saudi Arabia and made it a central objective, together with blocking Iran’s nuclear plans, at the first government meeting. In a comprehensive interview to the Saudi al-Arabiya network in December 2022, Netanyahu stressed the potential inherent in Israeli-Saudi relations and the countries’ shared interests. Indeed, Israel has a clear interest in strengthening and publicizing its ties with Saudi Arabia as currently the leading Arab country that has the status of the “custodian of the holy sites of Islam.” The assessment is that an agreement with Saudi Arabia would give other countries in the Muslim and Arab world greater if not absolute legitimacy to form ties with Israel.

Saudi Arabia also has the largest economy in the Middle East (one of the 20 largest economies in the world), with the world’s most extensive oil reserves. The size of the Saudi market (20 million citizens and some 10 million foreigners) represents significant potential for Israeli companies in various fields. With its economic weight, the Kingdom can help calm the Israeli-Palestinian arena with financial incentives for Palestinians that could also encourage a political process. Finally, Israel welcomes the attempt by Riyadh to lead the Arab-Sunni world in its struggle with the challenges of economic instability, radical Islam, and Iran.

Would Saudi Arabia, however, prefer to remain in the background, that is, to accept what the Kingdom needs from Israel in the framework of silent cooperation, without paying the price of normalization? So far, the benefits of quiet contact are sufficient, and making the contacts public would be too much, in view of the price they would have to pay, particularly in the context of Arab public opinion, which still has reservations over open, official ties with Israel. Moreover, these confidential, informal relations possibly even hinder the progress of normalization: since the Kingdom is benefiting from these widespread silent contacts, it has little incentive to move to open ties without US “carrots.”

Although over the years Saudi Arabia has shown limited interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and there is a sense of unwillingness to engage in the issue and antipathy toward the current Palestinian leadership, nevertheless the problem is thought to carry more weight in Riyadh than, for example, in Abu Dhabi. The monarchy in Riyadh is obliged to listen to the voices of the opponents of normalization, namely, the religious establishment, which in spite of the erosion in its authority, is still significant, and also has ambitions to lead the Arab world. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia must be cautious and sensitive in the Palestinian context. Therefore, it supports a political solution to the issue as a condition for normalization, and it officially adheres to the parameters of the Arab Peace Initiative. In return for official ties with Israel, Riyadh would presumably expect gains that can be presented as an achievement that contributes to implementing the two-state framework. However, as an interim stage, Riyadh may be prepared to accept calm in Jerusalem and the West Bank and symbolic positive Israeli steps toward the Palestinians, even without a significant breakthrough in the political process, provided that at the same time they receive what they consider their due compensation from the United States.

Thus senior Saudi officials speak with two voices on this issue. The different nuances among the Saudi leadership, for example between Mohammed bin Salman and his father the King or the foreign minister apparently reveal a wish to walk a fine line in order to maintain space to maneuver.¹ It is thought that the

¹ Some examples of public attitudes toward normalization with Israel: In an interview to *The Atlantic* in March 2022, bin Salman said that “We don’t look at Israel as an enemy, we look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together...But we have to solve some issues before we get to that,” including the Palestinian issue. On the other hand, his father King Salman appears to cling to the more traditional attitude toward Israel and the conflict, and links possible normalization to Israel’s compliance with the parameters of the Arab Peace Initiative and the establishment of a Palestinian state within the ‘67 lines, with Jerusalem as its capital. Various reports have indicated tension between the two on this issue, and while he lives, the King has the last word. In July 2022, before the visit of US President Joe Biden to Saudi Arabia, State Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir stressed the Saudi

purpose of this space is to enable the Kingdom to take small, slow steps towards normalization, even without a full solution for the Palestinian issue, while staying “loyal” to the Palestinians. It is likewise impossible to ignore the fact that the positive statements about relations with Israel made by the acting rulers, bin Salman and the Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan are also, and perhaps principally, aimed at the ears of the US administration and public opinion.

Moreover, the Kingdom also makes sure it has room to deny its moves toward Israel, by explaining they are intended to fulfill other needs. For example, on the issue of allowing flights to and from Israel in Saudi airspace, the country denies that these are confidence-building measures, claiming that they are unrelated to the matter of normalization.² In this context remarks by Saudi Ambassador to the United States Reema bint Bandar are interesting; in a June 2023 interview when she was asked about the possibility of normalization with Israel, [she said](#), “We don’t say normalization, we talk about an integrated Middle East, unified [as] a bloc like Europe, where we all have sovereign rights and sovereign states, but we have a shared and common interest.”

The Main Challenges to Normalization

a. The United States Administration

US involvement, by bridging between the parties and especially providing “incentives,” is critical because the Saudis are making possible normalization with Israel conditional on receiving some reward from the United States. Apparently emerging Chinese proactivism, as reflected by the Saudi Iranian agreement, has reminded the US of the importance of maintaining their regional involvement. Indeed, in recent months there have been signs of changes in US attitudes to the

leadership’s commitment to implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative and a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital: “We have made it clear that peace comes at the end of the process, not at the start.” Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan reiterated in January 2023 that “normalization of relations with Israel is in the interests of Israel and everyone, but real normalization will come through giving hope to the Palestinians and this means giving them a state.” In June 2023 Farhan said at a press conference with his US counterpart, Antony Blinken, that “we believe that normalization is in the interest of the region, that it would bring significant benefits to all,” but he added, without mentioning Israel by name, that “without finding a pathway to peace for the Palestinian people, without addressing that challenge, any normalization will have limited benefits.”

² During President Biden’s visit to the Middle East in 2022, the Saudi air authority, a member of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) signed in Chicago in 1944, announced that Saudi Arabia would allow Israeli aircraft to fly in its airspace. The vague announcement, framed as a national-economic constraint to improve the Kingdom’s position as a hub, expanded the permission to Israeli aircraft to fly in Saudi airspace en route to the UAE and Bahrain. At the same time, the Saudi Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Mohammed al-Ateeq, emphasized at the Security Council that this step was not a step toward normalization. Another measure viewed in Israel as tied to normalization was the departure of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai from the Tiran and Snapir Islands (which Egypt returned to Saudi sovereignty in 2017) and the positioning of cameras instead to continue to allow freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran.

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issue, and there is a political effort intended to bring about a breakthrough in the Israeli-Saudi channel.

In May 2023, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [noted](#) that the United States has an interest in normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and is working toward this. In July 2023, soon after his visit to Saudi Arabia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [added](#) that the administration is deeply involved in the attempt to bring about progress along the Israeli-Saudi channel notwithstanding the situation in the Palestinian arena, but some of the Israeli government's actions are making it difficult to move forward. In June 2023 the administration [appointed](#) Dan Shapiro, formerly United States Ambassador to Israel, as Special Advisor on Regional Integration. With this move, the administration is signaling its wish to promote relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. As part of his job, Shapiro will serve as a special envoy of the US State Department on the issue of normalization between Israel and the Arab countries. He will work to "support US efforts to advance a more peaceful and interconnected region, deepen and broaden the Abraham Accords, and build the Negev Forum."

Over the years, the close ties between Israel and the United States have been an incentive to the Saudis to express pragmatic attitudes toward Israel, in order to draw closer to the United States and improve its image in the West, on the assumption that "the road to Washington runs through Jerusalem." US willingness to promote the process (which also depends on the nature of its relations with Israel), certainly when accompanied by tangible rewards, is the main factor in the ability to promote normalization and bring about a breakthrough. An open political breakthrough with the Saudis requires progress on specific issues in the Saudi-US context that are also important for Saudi-Israeli relations, above all: a change in US attitudes to Mohammed bin Salman; US safeguards with reference to Iran and even a US-Saudi defense treaty; export of advanced US weapons to the Kingdom; and US-Saudi (civilian) nuclear cooperation. These demands are significant challenges to Israel and pose questions about the price of normalization with Saudi Arabia.

Compounding the questions are the warmer relations between Riyadh and Beijing, which are gradually extending far beyond the field of energy. Chinese involvement in the Gulf troubles Washington, which is making closer ties with the Saudis conditional on reducing China's access to the Kingdom, particularly for aspects of technology and security. It is not inconceivable that Saudi Arabia is exploiting relations with China as a bargaining chip to use against the United States. For the moment, not only are relations between Riyadh and Washington (and between the Crown Prince and the President) chilly, but the US

administration is in no hurry to meet the Saudi demands, just as the Saudis are not rushing to meet the US demands. This is a serious issue that also hampers the possibility of greater openness between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

b. The Palestinian Issue

It is estimated that the Palestinian issue is not as important for the Kingdom as in the past, but it is still central to its ability to move forward. The current Israeli government sees no reason to start political discussions with the Palestinians to promote the two-state framework. In fact, it appears to support the option of bypassing the Palestinian issue and promoting normalization between Israel and its neighbors, including Saudi Arabia, without the Palestinians, apparently “from the outside in.” Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as the leader of the Arab-Muslim world, will have difficulty establishing full and official relations with Israel without showing it has achieved progress on this matter and with reference to the Arab Peace Initiative (the Kingdom has previously announced that it considers the initiative as a basis for discussion, rather than a dictate). Such statements are heard regularly from senior Saudi officials and are not public evidence that they have abandoned this condition. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in a speech at the Arab League summit in May 2023 in Riyadh, said that “the Palestinian matter is at the top of our agenda,” while [mentioning](#) the Arab Peace Initiative and other relevant international decisions.

Moreover, since the current government took office in Israel, and considering the situation in the Palestinian arena, there has been a significant increase in the scope and harshness of Saudi criticism of statements by Israeli ministers and events in the West Bank. It appears that this development is not only evidence of Saudi dissatisfaction with Israeli government policy, but also perhaps of its readiness to be more involved in the Israeli-Palestinian process. In this context, the Kingdom is also reviewing its attitude to Hamas, and it may be prepared to provide financial assistance and even act as broker between the Palestinian factions.

Officially, Saudi readiness to recognize Israel and negotiate with it was based on the Arab Peace Initiative, which originated as a Saudi initiative. It was adopted by the Arab League in 2002, while Israeli governments (except for the Olmert government, 2006-2009) chose to ignore or oppose it. The initiative indicates the need to end the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, establish normal relations with Israel, and achieve a just solution for the Palestinian refugees, agreed by all parties, including Israel – in return for a Palestinian state “based on the June 1967 lines.” Despite the erosion in the degree of interest and solidarity shown by the Arab

world in general to the Palestinian issue, the Kingdom's official line is that without a satisfactory solution, namely progress towards a solution of the Palestinian issue, there can be no full normalization with Israel.

c. Mohammed bin Salman

The pragmatic line toward Israel attributed to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman raises the probability of a breakthrough in relations when he is crowned King. This assessment is based on bin Salman's statements about Israel and the Palestinian issue. The probability of his becoming king is high but not certain, as there is still opposition to his rule among various centers of power within the Kingdom. In this context, the question is whether bin Salman's position is sufficiently stable to allow him to take far-reaching steps regarding Israel. In addition, it is not inconceivable that as king, he will find his room to maneuver more limited, and he will listen to the more conservative voices in the country and in his own family.

d. Public Opinion and Islamic Legitimacy

A series of polls of Saudi citizens before and after the Abraham Accords were signed indicate ongoing opposition to normalization with Israel. The extent of the refusal to recognize Israel and maintain ties with it has remained steady over the past decade. Other data even reflect a drop in support for recognizing Israel following the Abraham Accords. Anti-Israeli and anti-US feelings are widespread and place obstacles in the way of any progress regarding relations with Israel. However, a monarchy that is determined to promote normalization with Israel should be able to negotiate public opinion, just as other Arab regimes have done.

But if Saudi Arabia seeks to reach normalization, it will need the backing of the country's religious establishment and its approval of the move. In the 1980s, following the Oslo Accords, there was a degree of religious consent to relations with Israel from the Saudi Chief Mufti at the time, ibn Baz. Senior religious figures have avoided discussing the subject in recent years and so the current view of the religious establishment is not clear, although it is probable that they would follow the instructions of the monarchy, which provides their funding.

The significance of any religious debate over relations with Israel derives from the importance of Islam as a source of political legitimacy in a society with a traditional character. In addition, the Islamic justifications for peace are intended to soften the cognitive dissonance involved in moving from long years of conflict with Israel, accompanied by religious tension, to a situation of open relations. Moreover, in recent years the Kingdom has been going through a process of cultural and

religious opening, with an obvious desire to create a more moderate and tolerant image. Comprehensive changes are taking place in relations between religion and state, including restrictions on the powers of the religious police and clerics, and cutbacks in Islamic studies. It is possible that this process will also have a positive influence on attitudes towards Israel.

e. The Palestinian Authority and the Abraham Accords

The measured rapprochement between the Gulf states that signed the normalization agreement with Israel and the Palestinian Authority could also bring the PA closer to Saudi Arabia. In the past relations were cool, and the Saudis previously stopped giving aid to the PA (apart from through charitable organizations such as UNRWA). However, and in particular after the formation of the current Israeli government and the escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Gulf states are exhibiting greater sensitivity and involvement in the issue. The United Arab Emirates, for example, is examining whether Israel is complying with its promise to refrain from annexing land in the West Bank and increasing its cooperation with the Palestinians in the UN and its aid to UNRWA.

In addition, elements in the Palestinian Authority that are worried about the actions of the Israeli government are asking for help from the Abraham Accords countries, and unlike the past, are showing willingness to participate in regional projects that bring them closer to the Gulf states in order to deter Israeli moves. The success of the Abraham Accords is critical to the ability to draw Saudi Arabia into the process. Greater willingness by the United States, and recently by Europe, to be involved in initiatives deriving from the Abraham Accords and the Negev Forum could act as an incentive to Saudi Arabia to become involved and reap the fruits of peace. In the past (before the bin Salman era), the Kingdom preferred not to lead moves and generally stayed in the background, but as the economic, technological, and security fruits of the Abraham Accords accumulate and become more tangible, the Saudis will have greater motivation to cross the Rubicon and participate in the process.

Possible Israeli Currency

- a. In the Palestinian arena: an Israeli commitment to refrain from applying sovereignty (annexation) to areas in the West Bank. It appears that it will be hard for Israel to “trade” annexation (again), as happened with the Abraham Accords, for warmer relations with Saudi Arabia. If the Saudis are ready for normalization with Israel, they will not be satisfied with a public

commitment to refrain from annexation and will demand moves on the ground that do not weaken the Palestinian Authority.

- The United States: Israel has an interest in stronger Riyadh-Washington ties, partly because they have direct consequences for the Kingdom's willingness to advance toward normalization. Problems with ties between Israel and the United States are also relevant here, taking into account the Israeli government's plans for a judicial overhaul and its policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Israel has [some](#) ability to influence the United States (the White House and Congress) to soften its stance over Saudi Arabia (Israel worked in Washington on behalf of Egypt and the Emirates). However, this ability is limited and depends on closeness between the leaderships of the United States and Israel.
- Religion: Israel cannot grant Saudi Arabia influence on the Temple Mount, which would be contrary to the peace treaty and status quo arrangements with Jordan and its special status there, as well as damaging to the Israel-Jordan peace. Second, it is not at all certain that the Saudis want this responsibility, which would be another burden and reduce the value of Mecca and Medina, under its charge, as the most important sites in Islam. Therefore, it is possible to increase the value of this currency by setting up special arrangements for Muslims coming to pray at al-Aqsa with Jordanian cooperation (previously the option was considered of building an airfield in the Horkanya valley near Jerusalem for Palestinians in the West Bank and/or an airfield in the name of King Salman for pilgrims traveling in both directions – to Mecca and to Jerusalem).
- Technology and business: Mohammed bin Salman has set himself the goal of bringing the Saudi economy and society into the 21st century, and is therefore promoting a series of initiatives that require external investment. A move toward normalization could provide international dividends for the Kingdom and help with ambitious development projects that the Crown Prince is promoting in the framework of Vision 2030, as well as improving the Saudi image and reducing tension with the United States. Israel can help by providing access to technologies in which it has a relative advantage, for example, participating in the development of Neom.
- Security cooperation: both countries are interested in being part of the regional air defense system against missiles and unmanned aircraft, under the sponsorship of the United States. Israel can also sell Saudi Arabia some

of its technology and means for detecting and bringing down aircraft and missiles.

- The Saudi/Arab Initiative: this initiative bears considerable weight for the Saudi leadership and it is specified as one of the conditions for possible progress for Israeli-Saudi normalization. Israeli recognition of the initiative, or at least a reference to it, as the basis for negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict would make it easier for the countries to promote relations between them.

Conclusion

A political breakthrough between Israel and Saudi Arabia is possible, but will require deep US involvement and agreement over US recompense to the Saudis that are also acceptable to Israel. This matter is very important because many of the Saudi demands, particularly in the nuclear field, are sensitive for Israel.

Although the Saudis are mainly looking to the United States to reward them for normalization, they will also need to show that the move yields benefits on the Palestinian front. The Saudis still have some room for flexibility and could even agree to make progress with Israel below the “Palestinian state threshold,” but other steps that the Saudis could demand include blocking any moves to annexation, limiting construction in settlements, promoting calm in the Palestinian territories, maintaining the status quo on the Temple Mount, and other moves to build trust between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, partly to prevent its collapse. At the same time, changes in the composition of the current Israeli coalition would help progress by allowing more Israeli flexibility on the question of relations with the Palestinians.

As of the time of writing, on the matter of a full peace treaty, the Israeli maximum does not yet meet the Saudi minimum. For Saudi Arabia, a peace treaty with Israel is still a step too far. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has chosen to strengthen its ties with Israel gradually, with terms and circumstances that it deems convenient, while maintaining its secret contacts with Israel. There is still a possibility for greater closeness based on confidence building measures, including, for example, permits for pilgrims to fly directly from Israel to Saudi Arabia, plus some incentives for doing business, in other words, a continuation of creeping normalization.