Saudi Arabia's Evolving Relationship with Israel: Complexities and Considerations

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In recent months international attention is heavily focused on the so-called Mega-Deal between the United States and Saudi Arabia that also includes a Saudi Israeli component. The Biden administration is working to implement a regional initiative that includes Israeli-Saudi normalization, or "integration," as the Saudis refers to it.

Also, international media attention has focused on Saudi demands from the United States in return for its consent to normalize relations with Israel, including a US-Saudi defence pact, permission to operate a full nuclear fuel cycle on its territory, and the sale of advanced US weapons to Saudi Arabia. Yet, less attention was given to analyze Saudi interests and sensitivities on the matter.

The Saudi Position

For many years Saudi Arabia has shown limited interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, along with a palpable aversion to engagement with the issue and to the conduct of the Palestinian leadership – both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. However, Riyadh is more committed to the Palestinian issue than Abu Dhabi, if only because of its status and role in the Muslim world as the "custodian of the two Holy Places," and its would-be regional leadership. The Royal House and King Salman himself (who is believed to be more faithful to the Palestinian idea than his son the Crown Prince) are committed to hear the voices of those who object to normalization in the Abraham Accords format, the religious establishment (notwithstanding the erosion of its powers), and feelings in the Saudi and Arab street.

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