

# Peace Amid War: Saudi Arabia's Public Opinion Challenge in Promoting Normalization With Israel<sup>1</sup>

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**In an effort to advance normalization with Israel, Saudi Arabia faces muted but significant public opposition, which has been exacerbated following the war in Gaza. The popular rejection takes many forms: There is a religious dimension, which views a peace with Israel as contrary to Islamic law; a pro-Palestinian dimension, which regards opposition to normalization as a demonstration of support for the Palestinians; and a liberal perspective, which cautions that ties with Israel could empower the Saudi regime to further violate human rights. Accordingly, Riyadh is making a concentrated effort to generate public support for normalization, raising high expectations about the concessions that Israel will make to the Palestinians in return. While Israeli discourse focuses on security cooperation with Saudi Arabia against Iran, the Saudi public shows little interest in this aspect, focusing instead on the economic benefits of the relationship. Overall, the reception in the kingdom of a normalization agreement highly depends on the success of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious reforms and ventures. The more these initiatives yield positive results without provoking a backlash, the better positioned Riyadh will be to mitigate public dissent and move toward establishing relations with Israel.**

On the eve of Hamas's October 7th attack and the ensuing "Swords of Iron" war in Gaza, Israel and Saudi Arabia moved closer than ever to a historic normalization agreement. Only two weeks before the war, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, [asserted](#) in an interview with American media that the prospect of such an agreement seemed "serious for the first time," referencing negotiations between the kingdom and the United States aimed at a comprehensive agreement that will include, among other things, Israeli-Saudi normalization. Even the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip did not bring the

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normalization process to a halt and after a three-month pause, [US-Saudi talks resumed](#) in January 2024 even if [Riyadh, in public](#), conditions normalization on a ceasefire in Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The slow but steady approach of Bin Salman toward normalization with Israel raises the question of how the Saudi public would receive such a move.

### **Historical Background: The Government Discourse and Its Changes**

There is not much historical baggage between Israel and Saudi Arabia standing in the way of normalization; the two countries do not share a border, and they have never fought one another, apart from a negligible Saudi force that participated in the 1948 War. Nevertheless, for most of Saudi Arabia's century-long existence until the last decade, the government's discourse and indoctrination were marked by harsh antagonism toward Israel and Jews in general. While it banned worship of all religions other than Islam, Riyadh exhibited a particularly stringent attitude toward Jews: they were prevented from entering the kingdom, even for work purposes, on the grounds that they would defile its sanctity, and antisemitic content such as "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" found favor among the ruling elite. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has been one of the most pragmatic in the Arab world toward recognizing Israel; notably, as early as 1981, the then Crown Prince Fahd endorsed an Arab League initiative that acknowledged Israel's right to exist in peace, contingent upon its withdrawal to the 1967 borders and resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. Furthermore, in 2002, the Saudis instigated the Arab Peace Initiative, offering full normalization with Israel as part of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

This duality was the result of the close alliance from which Saudi Arabia emerged, between the Al Saud royal dynasty and the Wahhabi sect in Islam. Under this alliance, the royal house practiced political pragmatism in the diplomatic sphere, while domestically enforcing Islamic Sharia law in its strict Wahhabi interpretation. The Saudi kings leveraged their upholding of Wahhabism to claim legitimacy for their rule over Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina, presenting themselves as the ultimate model of Islamic virtue. Wahhabism pretends to purge Islam of detrimental external influences, including Judaism—not only in the context of Israel, but as part of a long-standing religious dogma predating Zionism. Furthermore, the Saudi elite historically associated Marxism with Judaism, inspired by classical Western antisemitism. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Saudi royal family framed the Palestinian cause as an Islamic issue and a component of the kingdom's Muslim identity, which entailed projecting not only to its people, but to the entire Muslim world that prays toward Mecca.

A series of developments in the 21st century caused a shift in the power dynamics between the Saudi royal family and the religious establishment, leading the royal family to diminish the power of the latter and distance itself from Wahhabism. Key factors include the 9/11 attacks, carried out by terrorists who were educated in Wahhabi institutions. The regional ascendancy of Islamist actors that challenge the Saudi monarchy, such as Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and ISIS also played a role. As the American reliance on Saudi oil decreased, awareness of Saudi Arabia's internal repression grew. In response, Riyadh turned to burnish its global image in a bid to diversify its economy through investment and tourism.

A decade ago, in 2014, the Saudi authorities [allowed Jews](#) to work and live in the kingdom, signaling a shift in the attitude toward the Jews and Israel. The turning point occurred when Muhammad bin Salman became crown prince in 2017, as he openly declared he had renounced Wahhabism in favor of "a return to moderate Islam." Antisemitism and calls for the destruction of Israel were removed from Saudi schoolbooks and disappeared from the media. Although Israel is still absent from the official Saudi maps, the government portrays it in a much more tolerant way that focuses on criticism of its control over the Palestinians. Since 2018, Rabbi Jacob Herzog, an American-Israeli, [has been operating within the kingdom](#) with the support of the authorities to organize the slowly growing Jewish community. During her 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia, Deborah Lipstadt, the US administration's special envoy to combat antisemitism, [testified](#) that [she was impressed](#) by the progress the kingdom had made in eradicating antisemitism.

These trends, however, do not necessarily concern Israel. Rather, they form part of Bin Salman's far-reaching set of socioeconomic reforms, "Saudi Vision 2030," and his strive to outwardly project a Saudi image of pluralism and moderation, particularly to improve the kingdom's position in Washington. Nonetheless, it seems that the new tolerance toward the Jews is also aimed at laying the groundwork in the Saudi public for the kingdom's relationship with Israel, which it has been taught to hate for decades.

Although Saudi Arabia did not join the Abraham Accords in 2020, it indirectly supported them, notably by allowing flights to pass over its territory from Israel to the Gulf. In the decade leading up to the Abraham Accords, clandestine relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia took place and were strengthened, in part, due to the shared threat posed by Iran and its regional proxies. In March 2022, Bin Salman crossed the Rubicon [when he declared](#) in an interview that [Israel "is not an enemy,](#) but a potential partner" of Saudi Arabia. The message from Riyadh was that it is willing to demonstrate flexibility regarding the Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulated a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue, but the "price tag" of

normalization with Saudi Arabia—the custodian of the holy places that supposedly bears not only a national but an all-Islamic responsibility—is higher than that of other Arab countries.

### **Public Reaction to the New Policy**

On the surface, the shifting attitude of the Saudi government toward Israel and Jews, along with other religious and social changes that have been introduced, has not provoked any protests or public dissent within the kingdom, suggesting that Bin Salman is able to further his vision for relations with Israel. Given that Saudi society is young, with approximately 70 percent of the population under the age of 30, it may be amenable to significant changes. However, it is still uncertain whether this apparent lack of opposition signifies genuine support for Bin Salman and his policies, or if it stems from a fear of expressing dissent.

In Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with stringent restrictions on freedom of speech—where citizens can be imprisoned for criticizing government policies on social media—it is difficult to gauge public opinion on normalization with Israel. Public sentiment is not only shaped by the official narrative, but it is also influenced by online information and international media (especially the popular Al Jazeera network, known for its critical stance toward the Saudi government). Social networks indicate that there is opposition to normalization with Israel, but its scale and impact are difficult to assess. For example, [a Twitter account](#) named “Saudis with al-Aqsa,” advocating against Israel’s existence from an Islamist and pro-Palestinian perspective, garnered nearly 300,000 followers while remaining anonymous.

A series of [polls conducted](#) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy since the Abraham Accords in 2020 provide a rare glimpse into Saudi attitudes toward normalization with Israel. Before the current war in Gaza, approximately 40 percent of Saudis supported economic ties with Israel if they proved beneficial to the local economy. This figure, although a minority, indicates an exceptional openness to entertain pragmatic relations with Israel; in contrast, support for similar ties in Egypt and Jordan, both of which have peace treaties with Israel, hovers around only 10 percent.

However, sentiments shifted dramatically during the Gaza war. In November–December 2023, support for any form of relations with Israel dropped to 20 percent, and an overwhelming majority of Saudis (96 percent) favored the immediate cessation of ties between the Arab states with Israel in response to its actions in Gaza. Although the timing of the poll may have heightened this response, it should be noted that even before the war, 87 percent of Saudis

believed that Israel could eventually be defeated, and only five percent agreed that world Jewry should be respected and that relations with them should be improved.

These surveys also highlight a discrepancy between the interests of the Saudi government in having ties with Israel and those of the populace. Only 20 percent of Saudis expressed support for their government's cooperation with Israel against Iran, while only a slim majority of 60 percent of Saudis even viewed Tehran as a rival after the Saudi–Iranian reconciliation in March 2023.

### **The Saudi Polemics Regarding Normalization**

Saudis have raised multiple arguments against normalization with Israel. Liberal Saudi dissidents exiled in the West find Riyadh's rapprochement with Israel as a vulnerability in Muhammad bin Salman's policies. This milieu considers the normalization efforts with Israel, along with Bin Salman's other reforms, as a veiled attempt to bolster the regime's capacity to suppress dissent and human rights in the kingdom. This group claims that behind the normalization is Bin Salman's interest in Israeli weapons and surveillance technology—which will be used against Saudi citizens just like they are used against the Palestinians—while whitewashing the regime's image in the United States (often citing the Saudi use of the Israeli-made Pegasus spyware to monitor dissidents, including Jamal al-Khashoggi, who was murdered in 2018, and Loujain al-Hathloul, who was imprisoned for her activities supporting women's rights). Opponents of normalization in Bahrain and the UAE have voiced similar arguments.

As much as the liberal opposition does not pose a significant threat to the Saudi regime, the idea that normalization with Israel underpins the regime's repressive practices against Saudi citizens could gain traction within the kingdom—where it is not allowed to be expressed—through social media and the Qatari outlets.

The Islamic sphere in Saudi Arabia is also engaging in the issue of normalization. Despite the image that Bin Salman tries to convey, Saudi Arabia is still a devout country, making the Islamic perspective critical. Thus, the discourse in the kingdom's mosques and various religious institutions is of paramount importance. Moreover, the appeal of Islamist actors has always been the greatest threat to the Saudi royal family, pushing the regime to tighten control over the messages delivered by the imams and clerics. [In a rare public statement](#) on [the issue](#) given to the Israeli channel "Kan" in August 2023, Sheikh Ahmed al-Ghamdi, who has held senior positions in the Saudi religious establishment, said that Saudi clerics

“differ in their views” regarding rapprochement with Israel. However, he implied that if Israel complied with Palestinian demands on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative (in line with Saudi Arabia’s official position), the dissenting views would not stand in the way of normalization.

In recent years, the government has seemingly influenced the discourse of the clerics under its control to portray the Jews and their relations with them in a positive light. For example, the “Muslim World League,” a Saudi-funded network of clerics that used to be known for its extremism, has in recent years begun to engage in interfaith initiatives, among others, with Jews; its head, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Issa, even made a [highly publicized visit](#) to Auschwitz at the beginning of 2020. Another example is the most-heard sermons in the kingdom of the imams of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. In September 2020, in parallel to the signing of the Abraham Accords, Imam Abd al-Rahman al-Sudais [dedicated his sermon](#) to stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad that describe his positive relationship with the Jews. He noted, for example, that the Prophet shared harvest crops with the Jews in Khaybar and that on his deathbed, he pawned his shield to a Jew. Given the timing of this sermon, it was largely perceived as an Islamic seal of approval for relations with Israel. At the same time, some ambivalent voices about normalization remain; in 2022, during a sermon in Mecca, Imam Salih bin Humaid [called on Allah](#) to protect Muslims from “the Jews who are occupiers and thieves.”

Religiously, the Saudi clerical establishment may back normalization with Israel based on a 1994 [religious ruling \(fatwa\)](#) by Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. Following the Oslo Accords, Ibn Baz—who until his death in 1999 was considered the kingdom’s leading religious authority—authorized a Muslim ruler to reconcile with the Jews as long as it benefited Muslims, citing the Treaty of al-Hudaybiya from the Qur’an in which the Prophet Muhammad reconciled with the Quraysh infidels. This is a powerful argument, as it not only sets a precedent of making peace with non-Muslims—in that case, even infidels—but it also attributes to the Prophet himself an act that contradicts the argument of the opponents of normalization who claim that agreement with Israel contravenes Sharia law. Ibn Baz’s stature and influence, emblematic of a religious conservative yet politically flexible “old” Saudi Arabia, gave this fatwa considerable weight, and it was cited in the Gulf discourse following the Abraham Accords.

Noteworthy, the religious establishment in Egypt also cited the Treaty of al-Hudaybiya to legitimize the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, as did Yasser Arafat with the Oslo Accords. Some commentators interpreted this at the time as an indication that Egypt and Arafat saw the peace with Israel as merely a temporary

necessity until an opportune time arose to fight, akin to how the Treaty of al-Hudaybiya was eventually violated by Qurayshi infidels, leading to the Muslim conquest of the Jewish Khaybar. Given the polls showing the Saudi public's belief that Israel will one day be defeated, this dual meaning may help assuage the staunch opponents of normalization by implying that reconciliation with the Jewish state is not eternal.

While establishment clerics are ultimately subservient to the Saudi government's decisions about normalization, this is not the case for preachers outside the establishment. In this context, it is worthwhile noting a circle of Saudi clerics known as the *al-Sahwa* ("The Awakening") movement. This movement gained immense popularity as it sought to correct what was perceived as the Saudi royal family's religious negligence, seen as infringing upon its right to represent Islam, particularly regarding ties with the Western world.

The al-Sahwa movement first became prominent during the first Gulf War in 1991, when its clerics denounced Mufti ibn Baz's religious ruling permitting the deployment of the US military in the kingdom to protect it from Saddam Hussein, regarding it as the surrender of Islam to non-Muslims. On a similar basis, two of its leaders, Sheikhs 'Aidh al-Qarni and Salman al-Ouda, [appealed](#) in 1994 Ibn Baz's decree allowing reconciliation with Israel. [They held](#) that Islamic law categorically forbids reconciliation with the Jews over the Islamic land of Palestine since this would only serve the Jews, and Islam would eventually triumph over them. Hence, a Muslim ruler is not allowed to sign such an agreement, let alone the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites. Another prominent member of al-Sahwa, Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, [quoted Islamic scripture](#) to prove Israel's imminent demise. Accordingly, the movement strongly criticized the Arab Peace Initiative and Saudi Arabia's perceived inadequate support for the Palestinians against Israel.

The oppositional stance of the al-Sahwa movement led the Saudi government to alternately harass and imprison its members, which did not stop them from gaining public sympathy. At the beginning of the previous decade, they became internet celebrities with millions of followers on social media. For example, Sheikh 'Aidh al-Qarni has 20 million followers on Twitter (now known as X) and half a million on YouTube, and Sheikh Salman al-Ouda has 12 million followers on Twitter.

Their voices, however, have not been heard regarding the warming in the Saudi-Israeli ties in recent years. When Bin Salman took office in 2017, he moved to completely wipe out the movement, and its members have either been imprisoned (such as al-Ouda and al-Hawali) or they have been silenced and forced

to renounce the opinions that they had previously voiced (like al-Qarni). Nonetheless, the great sympathy they had just a few short years ago cannot be ignored. Unlike groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda that undermine the modern state as a whole, al-Sahwa's messages dealt only with "fixing" Saudi Arabia religiously, and therefore they were more accepted by a wider audience. Hence, their Islamic approach regarding Israel—rejecting political pragmatism and leeway for the ruler in favor of an uncompromising line against reconciliation with Israel—is likely to still resonate in Saudi discourse, leading many Saudis to rule out normalization on religious grounds.

### **The Palestinian Issue in the Question of Normalization**

Like the rest of the Arab and Muslim world, the Palestinian issue is central to the opposition to normalization with Israel in Saudi Arabia. Despite some assertions, particularly after the Abraham Accords, that the issue has waned in the Gulf countries, the aforementioned poll indicates its persistent centrality among the Saudi public. At the moment, the war in Gaza and the harsh scenes that have been broadcasted from it have returned the Palestinians to the headlines in the kingdom. For many, normalization with Israel is seen as neglecting the Palestinians, while the refusal of normalization—despite its promised benefits—is viewed as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinians and support for their struggle.

It is currently difficult to ignore the contrast between the Saudi government's recent rapprochement with Israel and the fact that all its regional rivals are supporting the Palestinians in the ongoing war against Israel since October—whether Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood (with which Hamas is associated), or even the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Therefore, the survey results, showing a demand that the kingdom sever relations with Israel due to the war, reflect dissatisfaction among the Saudi public with their country's position on the Palestinian issue.

Riyadh has approached the issue by presenting a counter-narrative. Already before the war, when the Saudi-American contacts regarding a tripartite agreement with Israel were underway, an intellectual discourse emerged in the columns of the publicists in Saudi newspapers (directly or indirectly controlled by the government) [describing](#) Saudi Arabia's willingness to normalize relations with Israel not as an abandonment of the Palestinian cause, but on the contrary, as an alternative and effective means of promoting it. The writers [explained](#) that it is Israel and the United States that have been courting Saudi Arabia about normalization, while Saudi Arabia has conditioned it upon improving the situation of the Palestinians and enabling them to exercise their national rights (which is, a



softened version of the Arab Peace Initiative). Hence, there is purportedly no contradiction between support for the Palestinians and support for normalization.

The war that broke out on October 7 only reinforced this line of reasoning: the op-ed columns [concluded that](#) the unfolding tragedy in Gaza has only further proven that the solution to the Palestinian issue lies in an inclusive and wide-ranging peace process, which Riyadh seeks through normalization talks, [rather than the fruitless bloodshed](#) promoted by Hamas and the Iranian axis of resistance. Ultimately, it is unclear if the government succeeded in instilling in the public the notion that normalization with Israel works in the Palestinians' favor—a stance that starkly contrasts with the prevailing perception on the issue.

## **Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia is a country in the midst of a profound process of change imposed top-down by the royal house. Despite an obvious shift in the discourse on relations with Israel within the kingdom, hostility to Israel and aversion to the idea of relations with it are firmly rooted among the general public, leaving a clear gap between the positions of the populace and the government. Although not publicly expressed, the development of deep undercurrents in Saudi Arabia intolerant to the numerous accelerated reforms and ambitious ventures of the crown prince should not be ruled out. If Bin Salman does not “deliver the goods” in the long term—which means developing alternative sources of income to oil that will maintain Saudi Arabia's economic stability and services for its citizens—he might eventually face an internal backlash that would also put the normalization with Israel on the line. In this case, the pro-Palestinian, liberal, and religious arguments against normalization, which are often overlapping, will be used against it. Bin Salman's confidence in taking a dramatic step like normalization with Israel may increase over time, especially if and when he smoothly inherits the crown from his 88-year-old father, King Salman, and establishes himself as the undisputed king.

It is too early to say the war in Gaza is a game-changer for Israeli–Saudi normalization; the same incentives and obstacles remain, chief among them are Riyadh's security demands from the United States and the concessions Israel will be asked to grant the Palestinians. The war will likely increase the “Palestinian component” that Israel needs to fulfill as part of the deal in order to convey Riyadh's solidarity with the Palestinians—compensating for its relatively passive stance in the war—and show that leveraging normalization will also benefit the Palestinians, as promised. If Saudi Arabia is perceived internally and externally as having contributed to breaking the diplomatic deadlock between Israel and the Palestinians as part of the US-backed solution for Gaza's future, it could

significantly strengthen Crown Prince Ibn Salman's internal legitimacy to move toward an agreement with Israel.

In any case, normalization will be an unpopular move among the Saudis. This does not mean that it is impossible to "soften the blow" and create conditions for strengthening long-term relations between the countries. The few indicators of Saudi populace attitudes reveal a dissonance between the Israeli discourse on the advantages of normalization, focusing on the security and military alliance, and the Saudi public that does not express any interest in such a partnership and may even see it as facilitating government repression. While a US defense pact and nuclear capabilities would benefit the regime but not the average Saudis, relations with Israel supporting the Saudi economy could produce greater public willingness toward normalization. An Israeli contribution to the Saudi 2030 vision for diversifying sources of income, namely in technology and tourism, would also make it easier for the royal house and the religious establishment to convince the public that peace with Israel is beneficial for Muslims.