

NORMALIZATION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SAUDI ARABIA— THE RUSSIAN POSITION

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Russia's approach to potential normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia—mediated by the United States—is shaped by how such a development would impact the political and security landscape of the Middle East, especially in light of the global confrontation Russia is waging against the West on the Ukrainian front and beyond. Following October 7, 2023, Russia aligned itself with the pro-Palestinian and anti-Western axis, targeting Global South audiences with an anti-colonial narrative that calls for the removal of Western influence from their sociopolitical spheres. For this reason, a successful normalization process would harm Kremlin interests: it would tighten the strategic alignment between the United States and moderate Arab states, enhance U.S. influence in the Middle East, and bolster Israel's standing vis-à-vis the “Axis of Resistance” and its affiliates.

On the bilateral level, Moscow seeks to deepen economic cooperation with key regional players—especially Saudi Arabia. One reason is Saudi Arabia's critical role in the OPEC+ organization. Russia relies heavily on oil prices, particularly under the pressure of war and Western sanctions that have significantly damaged its economic capabilities. Another reason is to preserve the status quo in which Saudi Arabia maintains normal economic relations with Russia by not joining the Western sanctions imposed after

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the invasion of Ukraine. On December 6, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Riyadh at the head of a large delegation of senior officials. He discussed bilateral cooperation—primarily in economic and energy domains. Earlier, on October 11, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak (who also accompanied Putin in December) announced that Russia–Saudi cooperation would likely expand into the field of nuclear energy, and projected that bilateral trade could grow to \$7 billion by 2030. Israeli–Saudi normalization, which is also expected to strengthen Saudi–U.S. ties—especially in the nuclear energy sphere—therefore threatens to undermine Russia’s strategic plans for cooperation with Riyadh.

In addition, Saudi Arabia plays a role in the Russia–Ukraine context. It has facilitated prisoner exchange deals and maintains a relatively accommodating stance toward Moscow regarding the war. (Although Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky considered holding a second “peace summit” in Saudi Arabia, the kingdom appears reluctant to endorse his position.) From the Kremlin’s perspective, Saudi Arabia’s increasing closeness with the United States due to normalization would likely shift its positions unfavorably in such matters.

Beyond the risks to Russia–Saudi ties, normalization also threatens the position of Iran, Russia’s close ally. Iran’s importance to Moscow has grown substantially during the ongoing war with Ukraine. Normalization would contribute to deeper cooperation—including in the security domain—between the two leading regional powers, both of which maintain tense relations with the Islamic Republic.

Even before the Swords of Iron war, Russia had expressed criticism of the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. For example, in September 2023, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, criticized Saudi Arabia—albeit without naming it directly—for its progress toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, which he accused of engaging in “illegal aggressive actions,” including an unprecedented expansion of settlements in territory

meant to be part of a future independent Palestinian state. Nebenzya stated that U.S. efforts to normalize Arab–Israeli relations while the international legal framework for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was collapsing, bypassed the logic of the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative and undermined the chances for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Understanding Russia’s attitude toward the 2020 Abraham Accords can shed significant light on its likely stance regarding Israeli–Saudi normalization. The Accords laid the conceptual and diplomatic groundwork for a broader normalization initiative, including with Saudi Arabia, under a U.S.-led framework. However, they were signed in a period preceding the major escalation in tensions between Russia and the West (i.e., prior to the Ukraine invasion), when Moscow’s interests in the Middle East were more flexible and moderate.

Although Russia officially welcomed the Abraham Accords—after all, it’s difficult to publicly oppose diplomatic normalization when one maintains relations with all the involved parties—it nonetheless [voiced several criticisms](#). Rhetorically, Moscow highlighted the Accords’ failure to address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and expressed concern over the agreements’ anti-Iranian character. These two issues are important to Russia: the former as a traditional diplomatic lever that reinforces its role in regional affairs (illustrated by the Quartet on the Middle East, which Russia [continues to promote](#)); and the latter due to its special relationship with Iran and the desire to prevent the consolidation of a strong anti-Iran regional bloc.

More fundamentally, Russia’s [dissatisfaction with the Abraham Accords](#) likely stemmed from the fact that it was entirely excluded from the process. The agreements were formulated and implemented under exclusive American leadership, underscoring Washington’s diplomatic clout in the Middle East, while Russia’s absence highlighted the limits of its influence in the Gulf—unlike, for example, in the Syrian conflict where it has a leading role due to its military presence.

The Abraham Accords—and the potential normalization with Saudi Arabia—bring moderate Arab states closer to the United States. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this development is increasingly seen in Moscow as a strategic loss. In Moscow’s view, global and regional influence is now a zero-sum game. Israel’s strong support from the West—especially from the United States—since October 7 has cooled its relations with Russia, which has shifted its focus to winning sympathy in the Global South, including the Arab–Muslim world, where sentiment is largely anti-Israel.

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia’s relatively moderate stance toward Israel’s war effort—given its close relationship with the United States and uncertainty over its future with Iran—stands in contrast to what Russia would prefer: a more hawkish Saudi position toward Jerusalem. Russia would favor such a position to align with its own strategic interests, including managing oil production and deepening integration in emerging frameworks like BRICS+, which Saudi Arabia recently joined. However, Russia’s ability to influence Saudi policy is limited, and potential normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel may further weaken that influence.

Despite the aforementioned points, it is important to note that the issue of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia is not high on Russia’s strategic agenda. Moscow’s far more pressing interests include undermining Western support for Ukraine, securing alternative import (defense/dual-use/civilian) and export (oil, gas, minerals) corridors to bypass sanctions, weakening Western cohesion, and maintaining ties with close allies. Russia values its relationship with Saudi Arabia particularly for coordinating oil and gas prices and for attracting Saudi investment in Russia. Therefore, it is likely that Moscow will avoid directly harming this relationship in its efforts to thwart Israeli–Saudi normalization. Rather than being seen as acting against the kingdom, Russia will likely opt for indirect, mostly diplomatic and perception-based measures primarily targeting the United States and Israel. These measures may include efforts to increase tensions between the

parties—especially by highlighting the Palestinian issue, a resolution of which is a Saudi pre-requisite for normalization. Russia is also expected to step up its support for Iran and other actors within the “Axis of Resistance,” such as the Houthis and Shiite militias in Iraq, using them as leverage to pressure Riyadh into avoiding normalization with Israel.

The possibility of deepened Saudi–U.S. ties without full Israeli–Saudi normalization also runs counter to Russia’s interests. Consequently, Moscow is expected to act against Riyadh to prevent such developments as well, although obstructing this kind of strategic alignment may prove more difficult than undermining a direct normalization initiative with Israel.

Israel should account for the potential threat posed by Russia and prepare on both the diplomatic and public opinion level for the pressure that will be aimed at undermining its normalization efforts. Israel should publicly and clearly distinguish between normalization with Saudi Arabia and the broader pro-Palestinian or pan-Arab (anti-Israel) sentiment in the Middle East—sentiment that Russia may seek to exploit to block or delay the process.