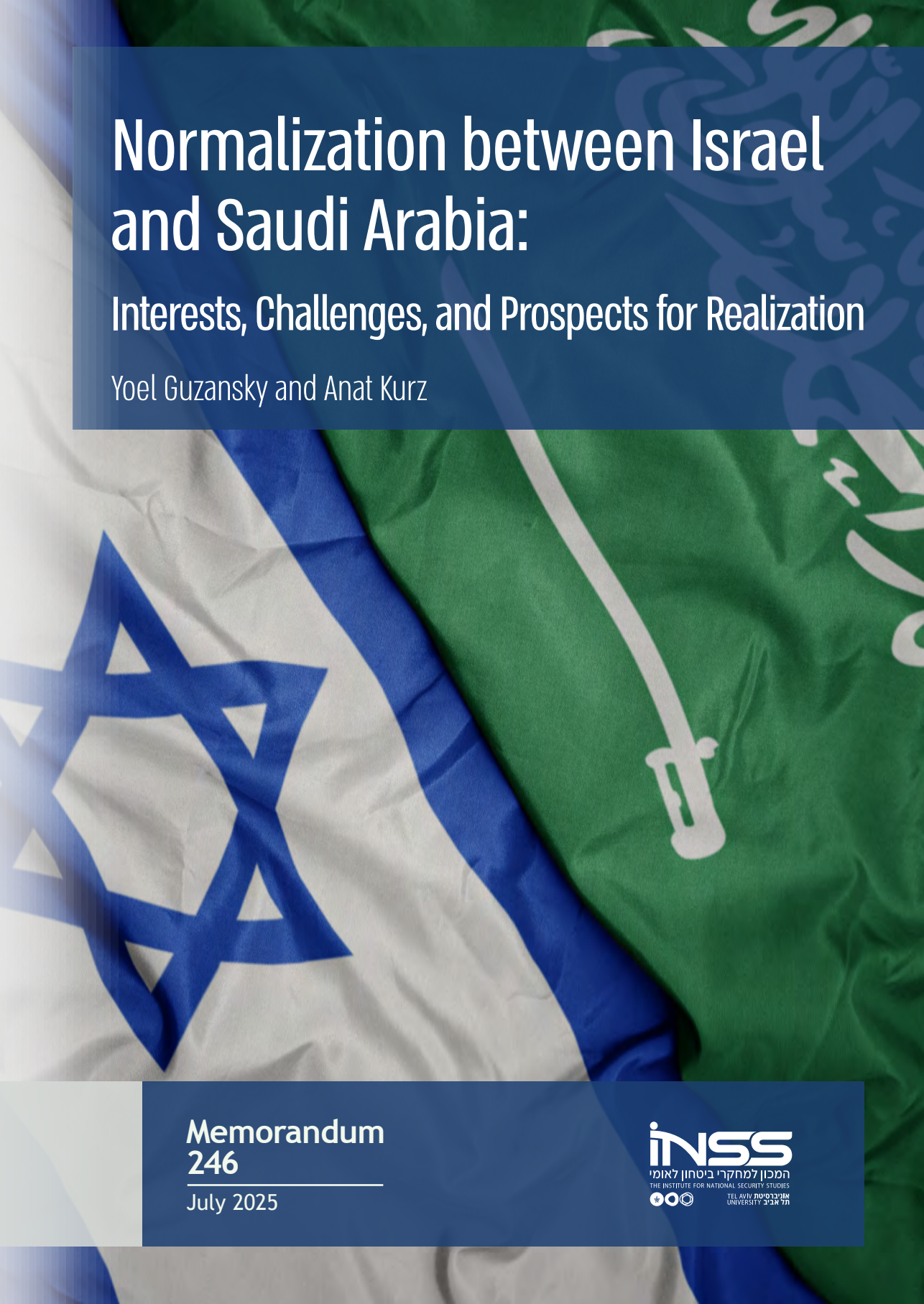
Normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia:

Interests, Challenges, and Prospects for Realization

Yoel Guzansky and Anat Kurz



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THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES
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The purpose of the Institute for National Security Studies is first, to conduct basic research that meets the highest academic standards on matters related to Israel's national security as well as Middle East regional and international security affairs. Second, the Institute aims to contribute to the public debate and governmental deliberation of issues that are – or should be – at the top of Israel's national security agenda.

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PREFACE

In its attack on October 7, 2023, Hamas aimed, among other goals, to undermine the prospects of a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Following the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war, then–US President Joe Biden stated that harming the normalization process was one of Hamas' objectives in launching the war. He further claimed that the parties had reached a breakthrough on the eve of the Hamas assault. Saudi Arabia also indicated that the sides had been close to an agreement prior to the war, and the impression remains that despite the conflict, the door to such an agreement may still be ajar.

Normalization remains largely on the table today, a year and a half after the war's outbreak—evidence of its continued strategic importance for the parties involved and of the fact that their underlying motivations have not fundamentally changed. Though while it appears that the Trump administration is continuing the efforts begun under its predecessor to create favorable conditions for an agreement, steps taken in public tell a somewhat different story: Shortly after the war began, Saudi officials announced the suspension of normalization talks with the United States. This was a calculated and expected announcement, crafted to avoid entirely shutting the door on the process while signaling the Kingdom's solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza and its refusal to remain passive in the face of the war's devastation. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia opted to cool its relations with Israel, at least as long as the war continues.

The three central actors in this process—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States—are each pursuing normalization for their own reasons. Israel seeks to deepen its integration into the region by forging an agreement with the most important Arab state with which it has yet to establish ties—Saudi Arabia, the largest economy in the Middle East and the custodian of Islam's holy sites. Israel also hopes that normalization with such a pivotal state will

lead other Arab and Muslim countries, including those beyond the region, to follow suit.

The United States, for its part, views the agreement as a way to consolidate a new regional order under American leadership, thus easing its efforts to contain Iran while signaling to its allies—and simultaneously to China and Russia—that the Middle East remains firmly within the American sphere of influence. As for Saudi Arabia, it sees in such an agreement a path to bolster its status and security, particularly in relation to Iran, by strengthening ties with the United States. In exchange for normalization with Israel, Saudi Arabia seeks to obtain a range of security and diplomatic benefits that it is unlikely to receive without completing the process.

Even if Hamas did not succeed in removing the normalization process entirely from the agenda, it did succeed in disrupting its momentum and altering the calculations of the key players—especially regarding the "price" each party is expected to pay to move negotiations toward an agreement. From Israel's perspective, and in light of the war—particularly the centrality of the Palestinian issue in its aftermath—the price of normalization has risen. It now includes agreement on a political-territorial framework for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, namely the articulation of a political horizon within the vision of a two-state solution. As of now, the Israeli government refuses to pay this price.

The cost that Saudi Arabia is expected to "pay" for normalization with Israel has also increased. It is now expected to deepen its involvement in the Palestinian arena and even contribute to the reconstruction and stabilization of the Gaza Strip. This comes in addition to the need to address public opinion within the Kingdom and in other Arab states, which has become more hostile toward Israel since the outbreak of the war. Since the beginning of the Swords of Iron war, Saudi Arabia has dictated the slow pace—or even suspension—of the normalization process. At present, the Saudi leadership is in need of legitimacy, which is tied, at least in part and perhaps primarily, to Israel's

actions and policies regarding the Palestinian issue. As a result, a new Saudi condition for normalization is the achievement of a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the war. In Riyadh's view, diplomatic relations with Israel cannot be established while the war continues.

From both the Israeli and Saudi perspectives, the American role in the normalization process is nothing short of critical. Both parties expect the United States to continue leading this initiative—which it itself launched—to reshape the Middle East, and to demonstrate a deeper presence and involvement in regional affairs. This involvement is also intended to counter Iran's subversive and aggressive ambitions. At the same time, the ongoing war in Gaza increases the likelihood—still not high—that the United States and Saudi Arabia will reach an agreement between themselves, excluding Israel. Such a scenario would deprive Israel of many of the benefits embedded in normalization and would grant Saudi Arabia significant dividends, some of which are highly problematic from an Israeli perspective.

Given that Hamas sought—and at least temporarily succeeded—in hindering progress on normalization, one must ask: What role and influence might actors who are ostensibly external to the process have on its future prospects? Furthermore, one must consider the possibility that a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement will not ultimately materialize. What regional dynamics and global circumstances might lead to this outcome? Would the process be derailed due to a shift in the interests of one of the central actors, or as a result of hostile action by a spoiler actor—similar to Hamas' actions on October 7, 2023?

This collection of essays focuses on the positions and interests of both state and non-state actors regarding Israeli-Saudi normalization, and on their direct or indirect, negative or positive, influence on the process and its likelihood of success. In the articles compiled here, researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) analyze the interests of various regional and global players with a stake in the process and those who will be affected

by its outcomes. The volume brings together diverse analytical perspectives. The assessments and conclusions do not always align, nor do they always lead to identical policy recommendations—but this diversity reflects the collection's central aim: to provide a broad and nuanced foundation for thought and discussion.

Thanks are due to Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel, Senior Research Fellow at INSS, for his insightful comments and substantial assistance in advancing the project. Thanks as well to the INSS researchers—the authors of these essays—for their contributions that shaped this volume.

Yoel Guzansky, March 2025

PART I

THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION – THE VISION OF NORMALIZATION

ISRAEL AND NORMALIZATION WITH SAUDI ARABIA

YOEL GUZANSKY, UDI DEKEL, AND ANAT KURZ*

The pursuit of formal relations with Saudi Arabia—envisioned as a path toward creating a regional coalition of moderate Arab states with Israeli participation under U.S. leadership—has been a strategic objective for successive Israeli governments over the past two decades. Israeli leaders have consistently expressed interest in a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia, and some governments have actively pursued this goal, working to enlist American support for the initiative.

Alongside ongoing clandestine ties between Jerusalem and Riyadh, senior Israeli officials have, over the years, publicly expressed support for the possibility of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert voiced this willingness as early as 2007: "If I had the opportunity to meet with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, he would be very surprised to hear what I have to say. I view very positively the active role that Saudi Arabia has been playing in the Middle East for many years." Former Prime Minister Yair Lapid also expressed support for such a move. After Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to Israeli flights following the Abraham Accords, he stated: "I commend the Saudi leadership for opening their airspace. This is a first step. We will continue to proceed with due caution—for the sake of Israel's economy, Israel's security, and Israeli citizens." Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that reaching peace with Saudi Arabia was one of his key objectives, and in the inaugural meeting of his current government (December 29, 2022), he identified the expansion of the circle of peace as one

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of two main foreign policy goals, alongside halting Iran's nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, in a wide-ranging interview with Saudi Arabia's *Al Arabiya* in December 2022, Netanyahu emphasized the vast potential of Israeli-Saudi relations and the shared interests of both sides.

Israel has a clear strategic interest in strengthening and formalizing its relationship with Saudi Arabia, which is currently the leading Arab state and holds significant influence in the Muslim world as the "Guardian of the Holy Sites of Islam." A normalization agreement with Riyadh is expected to legitimize ties between Israel and other Arab and Muslim states, including those outside the region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia boasts the largest economy in the Middle East (among the 20 largest globally) and possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves. Its market—home to approximately 20 million citizens and 10 million foreign workers—offers substantial opportunities for Israeli companies across various sectors, some of which are already operating in the kingdom in various capacities. Given its economic and political weight, Saudi Arabia could also help calm the Israeli-Palestinian arena through economic incentives for Palestinians, thereby contributing to the stabilization of the Gaza Strip and the establishment of a non-Hamas government there.

Israel and Saudi Arabia share common interests in a broader Arab-Sunni space, particularly in addressing key challenges such as economic instability, radical Islam, and Iran's malign regional influence and nuclear ambitions. Senior Saudi officials have publicly and repeatedly expressed interest in establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. However, they consistently emphasize that progress toward formal ties depends on advancing an Israeli-Palestinian settlement and achieving a two-state reality. In this context, the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, alongside Israeli military achievements in the war that began on October 7, 2023—especially the damage inflicted on Iran's regional axis—could provide the foundation for advancing formal relations and normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, abruptly shattered Israel's security doctrine, which had rested on deterrence and the projection of unmatched military superiority in the region. Israel found itself engaged in a prolonged conflict across seven fronts, its strategic value for regional stability and prosperity diminished, and its self-confidence in independently confronting threats and challenges significantly eroded. Nevertheless, the military gains Israel has achieved during the war have helped restore its regional value and provide a platform for reshaping its strategic environment. The practical synthesis of military, diplomatic, and economic strength can also form the basis for reengaging in the normalization process with Saudi Arabia and building a regional security-economic coalition with moderate Arab states, led by the United States and positioned against the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance."

Indeed, regional security cooperation has been tested—and in some areas, affirmed—during the war, including successful partnerships with Arab states in intelligence sharing, early warning systems, and integrated air defense against missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, all within the framework of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Normalization is expected to broaden and deepen this cooperation into areas beyond security, potentially serving as a gateway for moderate Arab and possibly Muslim states from outside the Middle East to join the emerging regional architecture—thus improving Israel's strategic posture.

Inputs and Potential Trade-offs

- In the **Palestinian arena**, the Saudi prerequisites for progress include a permanent ceasefire, an end to the war in Gaza, and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces. Riyadh is also expected to seek an Israeli commitment to refrain from applying sovereignty (i.e., annexation) over parts of the West Bank and Gaza. Should Saudi Arabia be ready for normalization, it is likely to demand more than Israeli public pledges—it will probably insist on

concrete measures to strengthen the Palestinian Authority, which it wants to see governing both the West Bank and Gaza. It will also seek a pathway leading eventually to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

As a condition for any political process with the Palestinians, Israel, in turn, should demand Saudi recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and security guarantees, foremost among them the demilitarization of the future Palestinian entity and the establishment of an effective mechanism for dismantling terrorist infrastructure.

- As for the **United States**, Israel has an interest in strengthening the Riyadh–Washington relationship, not only because it directly affects the Kingdom's willingness to advance normalization with Israel, but also because it could help anchor the American military presence in the Middle East. A framework for Israeli–Saudi normalization would certainly assist the Trump administration in overcoming opposition within the U.S. Congress to a U.S.–Saudi defense pact and to the nuclear agreement expected to accompany it.
- In terms of **economy and technology**, Israel has the potential to integrate into Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the flagship project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, particularly in regard to creating a prosperous economy that leverages the kingdom's unique geographic position at the heart of a global trade route connecting East and West, and diversifying its energy sector to reduce absolute dependence on oil revenues. One of the initiatives raised in the context of normalization is the establishment of an infrastructure corridor from India through the Arabian Gulf to the eastern Mediterranean and on to Europe, foremost among them the IMEC (India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor), with benefits for countries along the route including Jordan, Egypt, and Israel. Furthermore, Israel could assist the kingdom by providing access to technologies in which it holds a comparative advantage, including participation in the development of the futuristic city of Neom.

- In terms of **security cooperation,** Israel would contribute the determination to take military action and establish defense systems against actors from the Iranian axis and other agitators undermining regional stability. This cooperation could help curb Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and dismantle its proxies project. Both countries have a stake in joining the regional air defense architecture against missiles and UAVs under U.S. auspices. Saudi Arabia has already proven to be a potential security partner for Israel on several occasions—for instance, by taking part in the interception of missiles launched at Israel from Iran in April and October 2024. Subject to security restrictions, Israel could also sell Saudi Arabia technologies and other systems to help detect and intercept missiles and UAVs. In fact, security cooperation between the two states already exists within the CENTCOM framework and in classified arenas.

  Potential areas for cooperation include: (1) Intelligence coordination and sharing—mainly to counter Iran and its proxies, regional terrorist organizations, and radical Islam, and to formulate a comprehensive intelligence picture; (2) Joint military training to improve military proficiency and operational coordination; (3) Maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and supply lines in the Red Sea against maritime threats and piracy; (4) Missile defense against ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and offensive UAVs, including both detection and interception; (5) Cyber defense coordination and protection of critical infrastructure—energy, water, and communications; and (6) Emergency cooperation in cases of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes), climate crises, mega-terror events, or humanitarian emergencies.
- In the domain of **religion**, Israel cannot grant Saudi Arabia a role at the al-Aqsa Mosque—on the Temple Mount—without coordination with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, due to the peace treaty and status quo arrangements with Jordan and its special status at the site, and out of

concern over damaging the peace agreement. It is not at all clear that Saudi Arabia even seeks influence at al-Aqsa. Nevertheless, the value of Israeli cooperation in this area could potentially be enhanced through special arrangements involving Jordan to facilitate Muslim access for prayer at al-Aqsa. (In the past, the possibility was raised of establishing an airport in the Hurkania Valley near Jerusalem for West Bank Palestinians and pilgrims traveling to Mecca and Jerusalem.)

Saudi Arabia may play a significant role in promoting deep reform in the Palestinian Authority to improve governance, eliminate incitement and radicalism against Israel, and halt funding for the families of terrorists. The kingdom can also help establish an Israeli–Palestinian political process via a multilateral approach, in light of the failure of bilateral diplomacy. Israel should leverage Saudi influence to empower moderate Palestinian actors and, with them, stabilize the Palestinian arena so as to block avenues for Iranian or political Islamist (Turkish and Qatari) intervention and disruption. However, Israel must recognize that there is a gap between its interests in Saudi intervention in Gaza and the kingdom's actual capacity—and particularly willingness—to assume those roles, given Saudi sensitivities and fears of becoming entangled in the Gaza quagmire.

The benefits of normalization for Israel could be significant and multifaceted. However, Saudi Arabia has revised its position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Normalization has been delayed in part because no framework has been reached to end the war in Gaza, secure the return of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, and establish a governing authority in Gaza capable of stabilizing and reconstructing the territory. Prior to October 7, Riyadh was content with containing the conflict and working to moderate it. Now, it demands concrete steps toward resolution—in essence, the articulation of a political horizon in the spirit of the two-state vision.

Contrary to the Saudi stance, the current Israeli government rejects the establishment of a Palestinian state and also opposes involving the Palestinian

Authority in the stabilization and reconstruction of Gaza. While there is still a measure of flexibility on the Saudi side and a desire to keep the door open for negotiations, Riyadh appears to favor a separate U.S.–Saudi agreement that does not include a normalization component with Israel—particularly as Israel is perceived extremely negatively in Arab public opinion in the context of the conflict in Gaza.

In addition to a commitment by the Israeli government to promote a renewed political process, a breakthrough in Israel–Saudi relations would require deep American involvement and a formulation of US concessions to Saudi Arabia that are also acceptable to Israel. This issue is of high importance because several Saudi demands—chief among them domestic uranium enrichment—arouse deep and understandable concern in Israel.

Despite current and anticipated challenges and obstacles, in order to attempt to break the impasse in the normalization process—and in light of the kingdom's position on the Palestinian issue and its recognition of the Palestinian Authority as the representative of the Palestinian people—Israel should demand Saudi involvement, guarantees, and assurances that a renewed Israeli–Palestinian political track will effectively block extremist actors, chiefly Hamas. This process should be conditioned on reforms within the Palestinian Authority and the empowerment of moderate elements within it.

Israel may also request Saudi Arabia's active involvement in the establishment of a new governing authority in the Gaza Strip, aligned with the Egyptian reconstruction initiative adopted by the Arab League in March 2025—a moderate technocratic administration not affiliated with Hamas, committed to de-radicalization and to internalizing the consequences of the disaster Hamas brought upon the residents of the Strip. This would leave open the possibility of the eventual return of a reformed Palestinian Authority to govern the territory. Such an administration should be backed by a multinational and pan-Arab task force with Riyadh's support. Within this framework, joint Israeli–Saudi interests must be taken into account:

dismantling Hamas' military and political control, preserving Israeli military freedom of action to enforce demilitarization in Gaza, prevent the emergence of new threats, and halt arms smuggling—at least during the initial stages of implementing a reconstruction framework for the Gaza Strip.

Israeli–Saudi normalization would anchor the special relationship with the United States, particularly through renewed understandings grounded in shared values, including the fight against antisemitism and Islamist radicalization. Among other things, this would bolster and deepen American military and political support for Israel and facilitate the development of a joint policy toward the threats posed by Iran and its proxies in the region, as well as the nuclear threat. Another expected benefit of Saudi–Israeli normalization would be the reinforcement of regime and economic stability in Jordan and Egypt, along with broad-based cooperation with them, thereby deepening the roots of peace beyond the security dimension.

CHANGES IN THE SAUDI POSITION ON NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

YOEL GUZANSKY*

Saudi Arabia has so far remained outside the normalization process with Israel, unlike its Gulf neighbors—Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates—which over the years have made significant progress in establishing diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. However, in recent years, particularly since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman effectively became the kingdom's ruler, the Saudis have been advancing slowly yet steadily toward the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in a form of "creeping normalization." Unlike in the past, senior Saudi officials are now openly and frequently speaking about establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, albeit under certain conditions.

Saudi Arabia's position on normalization with Israel has evolved over the years, in line with changing regional political and security circumstances. Nevertheless, to publicly acknowledge relations, Saudi leaders continue to emphasize the need to move toward the realization of a Palestinian state. Even at the time of writing, the kingdom's stance toward formal relations with Israel is undergoing further adjustments—this time mainly due to the shockwaves from the war that began on October 7, 2023.

The Saudi Position on the Eve of the War

The pre-war conditions allowed Saudi Arabia to exercise diplomatic flexibility, thanks to the success of the Abraham Accords, relative calm in the Palestinian territories, and American initiatives to establish a regional political-security

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framework that promised substantial rewards for the kingdom. This flexibility was evident in positive statements by senior Saudi officials, most notably Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, regarding the future of relations with Israel. In a 2022 interview with *The Atlantic*, Bin Salman showed pragmatism, stating: "We do not see Israel as an enemy. We see it as a potential ally."

Alongside these declarations, there was a positive—albeit slow—shift manifested in actions aimed at improving the kingdom's image, contributing to the success of the Abraham Accords, and "testing the waters" to acclimate Saudi public opinion to greater openness toward Israel. This "external support" policy was reflected, among other ways, in changes to school curricula, permission for Israeli airlines to fly over Saudi territory, and relatively favorable media coverage and commentary in regime-controlled outlets.

Indeed, the Saudis allowed themselves diplomatic maneuvering space through which they could signal progress with Israel or retreat when tensions over the Palestinian issue or peace process flared. In this way, the Saudi regime strengthened its image as a champion of the Palestinian cause while simultaneously assessing whether the conditions were ripe for normalization with Israel. Thus, there is no inherent contradiction in the varying statements from Saudi spokespeople, but rather an intentional ambiguity regarding the conditions tied to the Palestinian issue that Riyadh presents to Israel as a prerequisite for formal ties. These differences also reflect a likely generational gap—for instance, King Salman bin Abdulaziz is perceived as more rigid than his son, the Crown Prince, on relations with Israel, at least as reflected in their public statements.

The Impact of the War on the Saudi Position

Saudi Arabia has remained consistent in its support for the establishment of a Palestinian state (even if the phrasing has varied) as a condition for its recognition of Israel. On the eve of the war that broke out on October 7, 2023, it was claimed that the kingdom was close to reaching an agreement with

the United States on a framework that included normalization with Israel—under different conditions than those it has demanded since the war began. About a week after the war broke out, the Saudi Foreign Ministry announced that the kingdom was halting talks with the United States on the matter. The horrific images of the war—especially the scale of destruction and casualties in Gaza—along with the public outrage they sparked throughout the Arab world, halted the momentum of negotiations and led the regime in Riyadh to cool its posture toward Israel.

As the war continued, senior Saudi officials gradually abandoned the ambiguity that had characterized previous formulations and began emphasizing their support for the Palestinians. This increased visibility of Palestinian solidarity and the hardening of conditions for an agreement with Israel are direct outcomes of the deterioration in Saudi and broader Arab public sentiment. While this did not manifest in public protests—particularly since demonstrations are forbidden within the kingdom—it was channeled, as usual, into social media. The circumstances raised concerns within the Saudi leadership about mounting criticism of the royal family and potential unrest, prompting a distancing from Israel and a simultaneous reaffirmation of commitment to the Palestinian cause.

The gap between public opinion and the relatively pragmatic position of the royal court is neither new nor unique to Saudi Arabia, but has widened due to the war and required the royal family to act to prevent an erosion of its legitimacy. As elsewhere in the Arab world, the Palestinian issue remains at the heart of the arguments raised by opponents of normalization with Israel. While previous Arab public opinion surveys pointed to a decline in the perceived importance of the Palestinian issue—relative to the growing concern over the Iranian threat—the war has returned the Palestinian question to the center of the public agenda, and the royal court cannot ignore this shift.

As a result, senior Saudi officials, including the Crown Prince and Foreign Minister, updated their positions and when expressing support for normalization,

they even referred to some degree of Saudi involvement in the Palestinian arena. In a speech before the Shura Council in September 2024, Mohammed bin Salman declared that "the kingdom will continue to work vigorously toward the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and will not establish diplomatic relations with Israel without this condition being met."

The issue of normalization with Israel is clearly influenced by Saudi public opinion, and especially by bin Salman's awareness of how such a move could hinder his coronation—a process that still requires domestic legitimacy. Despite his statement that he might risk his life if he signs an agreement with Israel, the sweeping socio-economic reforms he has initiated—which have marginalized many traditional power bases within the kingdom—pose no less of a threat to him than an Israel–Saudi normalization agreement, even one signed under favorable conditions.

In October 2024, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan reiterated the kingdom's position, emphasizing the importance of establishing a Palestinian state. He outlined three core conditions for progress: a complete ceasefire in the Gaza Strip; an Israeli commitment to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, including irreversible steps in that direction; and support for the Palestinian Authority's rule in both the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinian issue remains high on the agenda of the Arab world—especially in the wake of the war—and progress in the Israeli–Palestinian political process would significantly advance and expand normalization. To lend substance to its declarations, Saudi Arabia announced in September 2024 a new international initiative to promote the two-state solution. The member countries of the initiative have not been disclosed, nor have its objectives or next steps, but the initiative appears aimed at signaling that the kingdom is not indifferent to the Palestinian issue and is willing to take an active role in advancing the establishment of a Palestinian state. In any case, the kingdom's senior officials' wartime statements concerning the

Palestinian issue will make it difficult for them to "climb down from the tree." For Saudi Arabia—by far the most important Arab state with which Israel has yet to normalize relations—the political "price tag" for such an agreement will be significantly higher than that paid by other Arab states that previously signed agreements with Israel.

The Fear of Iran and the Road Ahead

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the regime from the top down, both to pave the way for the coronation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and to integrate itself into the broader regional détente, primarily aimed at easing tensions with Iran. Alongside the Palestinian issue, the Iranian question also affects decision-making at the highest levels of the Saudi leadership regarding normalization with Israel. Although Saudi Arabia has sought to stay out of the current conflict since the war began, its policy of "sitting on the fence"—against a backdrop of threats from Iran and its proxies, and accusations of assisting Israel (particularly in relation to the identification and interception of Iranian missiles and UAVs launched at Israel)—is not without risk for Riyadh. The kingdom does not trust its own military capabilities nor the willingness of the United States to defend it as robustly as it defends Israel against Iranian aggression.

Consequently, from Riyadh's perspective, the less risky option is to distance itself as much as possible from the Israeli–Iranian confrontation, while cautiously moving closer to Iran—even attempting reconciliation. Following Iran's 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities, the kingdom adopted a new strategy—a sharp departure from its previous policy—and launched a diplomatic effort that culminated in the 2023 agreement with Iran. This shift reflects an acknowledgment of Iranian dominance and a desire to keep Iran "close," so that it can monitor its bitter enemy. In Saudi eyes, the détente with Iran is an achievement that keeps the kingdom out of the direct line of fire, even after more than a year and a half of multi-front conflict in the region—

between Israel and Hamas, Israel and Hezbollah, and Israel and other Iranian proxies. It is not implausible that Iran's pressure and Saudi concerns about Tehran also contribute to the kingdom's hardening stance toward Israel and its tougher demands for normalization.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia retains a strong interest in improving ties with Israel, primarily due to the strategic dividends it can obtain from the United States in exchange for normalization—dividends it likely cannot secure through other means. Chief among these are various strategic guarantees, especially a defense pact and American approval for uranium enrichment on Saudi soil.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman understands that in order to enhance the kingdom's military and economic capabilities and ensure its long-term stability and prosperity, he needs an agreement with the United States. In an interview with Fox News roughly three weeks before the outbreak of war, he described the negotiations as positive and progressing, expressing hope that "the agreement will benefit the Palestinians and turn Israel into a regional player." When asked specifically about the kingdom's conditions regarding the Palestinians, he avoided a direct answer, simply stating that the issue was under negotiation and that, in any case, an agreement with Israel would be "the biggest deal since the Cold War." Those statements no longer reflect the current reality: the war's impact and Saudi fears of Iran have cooled enthusiasm for a normalization agreement and led Riyadh to demand the inclusion of a far more substantial Palestinian component than in the past.

In addition to the benefits the Saudis hope to obtain from the United States in return for normalization with Israel, they also wish to present themselves as significantly advancing the idea of a Palestinian state. This would earn them considerable legitimacy in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and domestically, it would constitute a major achievement for the crown prince as he prepares to assume the throne. In other words, Saudi Arabia seeks to show its critics—both real and potential—that its willingness to normalize relations with Israel

does not represent a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. On the contrary, normalization is framed as an effective means of advancing that cause, and there is no inherent contradiction between normalization and support for the Palestinians. Accordingly, the shift in the Saudi "price tag" for normalization can be seen as a sign of the kingdom's willingness to continue supporting the political process with Israel, despite the changed circumstances—particularly the ongoing, high-casualty war that began on October 7, 2023.

ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION—A CENTRAL AXIS IN THE AMERICAN VISION OF A REGIONAL STRATEGIC ARCHITECTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CHUCK FREILICH*

Since the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, the United States has worked to expand the circle of peace and promote normalization between Israel and Arab states. In the 1990s, significant progress was made with the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan and the establishment of low-level diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco, Tunisia, and Gulf states. A historic breakthrough occurred with the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, which led to diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, as well as Israel's inclusion in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) a year later. Since then, both the Biden and Trump administrations have worked to continue and expand normalization between Israel and additional Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia.

In late 2023, following the outbreak of war in Gaza, the Biden administration intensified efforts to promote this normalization as part of a broad American–Saudi–Israeli package deal ("Biden's Vision"). Under this framework, Saudi Arabia was required to normalize its relations with Israel, limit its technological ties with China (including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, communications, and semiconductors), and refrain from purchasing weapons from China. Israel was required to move forward toward a two-state solution, and the United States, to establish a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia, recognize its civilian nuclear program, and grant it virtually unrestricted access to advanced U.S. weapons systems, such as the F-35 fighter jet.

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On the eve of the war, U.S. officials estimated that the United States and Saudi Arabia were close to finalizing the bilateral elements of the deal and that its implementation essentially hinged on Israel's position regarding the Palestinian component. The Trump administration is currently working to promote a similar package in essence, though it sees a prolonged ceasefire in Gaza as a practical prerequisite.

Since 1961, the United States has avoided signing a defense treaty with any state—the ultimate form of U.S. security assurance. Therefore, the conditional willingness to do so with Saudi Arabia—a country perceived by many in the U.S. as problematic—stems from a range of significant strategic considerations. These include the importance the U.S. places on normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, progress on the Palestinian issue, the establishment of a regional strategic framework to contain Iran, and countering the influence of Russia and China in the region, as part of the global great-power rivalry.

In the eyes of the United States, Iran's "Axis of Resistance" attempt to thwart normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel and to derail the establishment of a strategic regional alliance against Iran was among the main causes of the outbreak of the war in Gaza. The U.S. views the heavy blow sustained by Iran's "Axis of Resistance" during the war as an important achievement and an opportunity to advance its objectives. Although Iran poses no military competition to the United States, successive American administrations have been reluctant to enter into direct military conflict with it.

American Considerations and Obstacles to Normalization and an Agreement with Saudi Arabia

The strategic considerations underlying the Biden administration's pursuit of a trilateral agreement with Israel and Saudi Arabia continue, to a great extent, to guide the policies of the Trump administration. However, the relative weight of these considerations, as well as the price the new administration will be willing to pay for them, may change significantly. Below is an analysis

of the main considerations and obstacles to the breakthrough that such an agreement would consittute.

Fear of commitment and international entanglements: It is no coincidence that the United States has refrained from establishing defense treaties for over 60 years, relying instead on less binding guarantees such as presidential declarations and Memorandums of Understanding. Within the Republican Party, including Trump himself, isolationist trends are evident, and Democrats also share concerns about commitments and international entanglements. The Biden administration's willingness to establish a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia therefore reflected the exceptional strategic importance it attributed to the trilateral framework. Trump and the Republicans also support, in principle, the desire to advance the goals of the trilateral framework, but they are less willing to provide the strategic returns mentioned in order to achieve them, especially regarding the Saudi demand for a defense treaty.

Conditioning the agreement with Saudi Arabia on normalization with Israel or a separate agreement: The Trump administration is expected to maintain this condition, especially if it assesses that it can revive the "Deal of the Century" or a similar initiative. For this purpose, it may also pressure the Saudis to settle for general and less binding Israeli statements regarding progress toward a two-state solution. However, its commitment to the trilateral framework is weaker, and if it assesses that Israel is the one blocking progress on the Palestinian component, it is not unlikely that it would settle for a separate agreement with Saudi Arabia alone.

The need for Senate approval for a defense treaty, or settling for a Memorandum of Understanding: An American defense treaty signature requires approval by two-thirds of the Senate. The likelihood that Senate Republicans will currently agree to establish a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia is unclear, and many Democrats are also wary of strengthening ties with the Saudis. Therefore, the likelihood is increasing that the United States will seek to settle for signing a defense memorandum with the Saudis, which does not

carry a contractual commitment and does not require Senate approval. Such a proposal would be a major blow to the Saudis, who seek the contractual commitment embodied in a defense treaty.

The demand for recognition of a Saudi civilian nuclear program: The Saudis rejected the conditions set by the Americans (even before the Biden administration) for the recognition of a Saudi civilian nuclear program, namely the stringent conditions of Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act ("gold standard"). It is likely that the Trump administration will show more flexibility on the matter. However, considerable opposition is expected from within the U.S. defense establishment and beyond, including research institutes and other bodies involved in arms control, and even from parts of the American public, who fear the risk of encouraging a nuclear arms race in the region and the precedent it would set.

Supply of weapons to Saudi Arabia: This component is the least problematic among the strategic returns the United States would be required to provide to the Saudis, both due to the strong economic interest in promoting the U.S. arms industry and the desire to strengthen Saudi Arabia's ability to defend itself and play an important role in the regional strategic framework. However, the sales may clash with the U.S. legal commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative edge, and could lead to demands from Israel and other allies for increased weapons supply (the United States has yet to fulfill its commitment to supply the UAE with F-35 jets in return for signing the Abraham Accords). Major arms deals require congressional approval, but are not expected to face significant obstacles.

Iran's response: Implementation of the comprehensive framework with Saudi Arabia, even just the U.S.–Saudi components, is intended to strengthen deterrence against Iran and its partners in the "Axis of Resistance." However, there is concern in the United States that Iran may respond with increased aggression, greater cooperation with China and Russia, and even demands for equivalent security guarantees from them. Growing friction with the

"Axis," such as attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria and on naval forces in the region, could increase internal pressure in the United States to withdraw its forces from the Middle East.

Implications for relations with China and Russia: The global confrontation with China and Russia is at the top of the American agenda in foreign and security policy, economics, and other areas. A breakthrough in security relations with Saudi Arabia, especially if accompanied by progress on the Palestinian issue and in Saudi-Israeli relations, would be considered a significant American achievement globally. This would enable progress toward institutionalizing the regional strategic framework against Iran and its containment, ensure continued American leadership as the dominant superpower in the arena, and reduce the influence of China and Russia in the region. These achievements would strengthen the United States' global standing vis-à-vis Russia and China, who, along with Iran and North Korea, are currently regarded as its main global rivals. On the other hand, it may increase friction and competition with China and Russia, and even push them to enhance their cooperation with Iran.

Outlook and Policy Recommendations for Israel

Normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia and institutionalization of the regional strategic framework against Iran may be seen by the United States as the preferred way to end the war in Gaza and as an appropriate response to the Axis of Resistance. President Trump would view such achievements as a direct continuation and the crowning achievement of his success in bringing about the Abraham Accords. However, at this stage, it is difficult to assess his willingness to grant a defense treaty to Saudi Arabia and invest significant resources in promoting normalization between it and Israel, and in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Israel has a strong strategic interest in normalization with Saudi Arabia, in institutionalizing the regional framework against Iran, and possibly in

establishing a U.S.–Israeli defense treaty in exchange for accepting a Saudi–U.S. treaty. These achievements would bring about a far-reaching transformation of the Middle Eastern landscape and may constitute an optimal response to Iran. Cooperation between Israel and CENTCOM countries has already deepened significantly since Israel joined the command, as was exceptionally evident in the joint response to Iranian attacks against Israel in April and October 2024. The possibility of expanding economic cooperation with these countries is also important for Israel.

Therefore, Israel must make every effort to align its policy with that of the United States in all its components. The Palestinian issue will continue to be an obstacle to progress toward implementing the package, unless the Trump administration waives the condition and pressures the Saudis to normalize relations with Israel regardless of the Palestinian issue, or if Washington and Riyadh reach an understanding that the "Deal of the Century" or something similar constitutes a sufficient basis for progress. In this case, the pressure will shift to the Israeli side.

Without firm Israeli support, a U.S.–Saudi deal—particularly regarding a defense treaty and recognition of the civilian nuclear program—is expected to face significant difficulties in Congress. This could open up an opportunity for Israel to influence the contents of the deal and demand a parallel defense treaty, or at the very least concrete steps to maintain its qualitative edge. However, Israel must remain alert to the possibility that the Trump administration might still be tempted to promote a separate agreement with Saudi Arabia and act to prevent it.

PART II

THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION

2

NORMALIZATION AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

YOHANAN TZOREFF*

The normalization agreements signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco in 2020, just a few months after the unveiling of then-President Trump's "Deal of the Century," dealt a harsh blow to the Palestinians in general and to the Palestinian Authority in particular. The PLO and the PA had for years based their foreign policy on Arab support, which was considered a given—at least by default—during times of crisis and hardship. The signing of these agreements, the lack of opposition to them, and even the degree of support they received from key Gulf states—foremost among them Saudi Arabia—were perceived by the PA as a retreat from the longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause. Terms such as "abandonment" and "betrayal" were frequently used by many Palestinian spokespersons. At an Arab League summit held after the agreements were signed, and at the request of the PLO, Saeb Erekat—who was in charge of the negotiations with Israel—accused the representatives of Arab states of undermining Arab solidarity by disregarding the Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates that the Arab world would recognize Israel only after it withdraws from the occupied territories and a Palestinian state is established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This initiative was formulated and defined as the official Arab position for resolving the Israeli-Arab conflict and was endorsed by all Islamic countries at the 2007 Islamic Conference.

Thus, the Abraham Accords exacerbated the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, intensified internal criticism of PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, accelerated the loss of legitimacy of both Abbas and the PA in the eyes of the

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public, and compelled him to renew reconciliation efforts with Hamas, the strongest and most threatening rival in the Palestinian arena.

Following the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States in November 2020, Abbas abandoned the reconciliation efforts and returned to the traditional approach of relying on a "fair" American administration—unlike the Trump administration—and favoring a political process over intra-Palestinian reconciliation. However, Biden, who began his presidency in January 2021, found it difficult to restore the parties to a political track similar to the processes that had taken place before the Trump era, due to the instability of the Israeli political system and the unwillingness of successive Israeli governments during those years to engage in a process. Therefore, the Biden administration formulated a regional package, at the center of which was Israeli–Saudi normalization in exchange for Israeli consent to a two-state solution. The guiding rationale of the plan was to provide a response to Israel's security concerns regarding the threat posed by Hamas and the Axis of Resistance, through a regional front led by the United States, as well as to provide Arab backing for decisions the PA would have to make in the context of a settlement with Israel and in its confrontation with Hamas.

The official Palestinian position, as presented by senior Palestinian authority officials over the past twenty years, is based on the Arab Peace Initiative. Therefore, as long as a Palestinian state is not on the table and there is no Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories, the PA absolutely opposes any normalization agreement that is not based on its principles. However, the reality that has existed since the Trump era—and even more so after October 7, 2023—reflects the deep distress the Palestinian Authority is in. It suffers from severe weakness, which hinders its ability to fulfill its responsibilities and obligations in most of the areas under its jurisdiction. Should normalization be realized, it would lose its nearly exclusive support base—the Arab world. This is because the Biden administration has not repaired the damage caused to the PA by the adversarial policies of the Trump administration. Moreover, for

several decades, the PLO and the PA have distanced themselves from other Palestinian resistance organizations, but now claim they are left without leverage. On the one hand, they have renounced armed struggle and are accused by resistance organizations of delegitimizing armed resistance. On the other hand, they face international opposition to the legal and diplomatic struggle they seek to pursue against Israeli control in the West Bank, and are subject to numerous dictates from donor states.

The Palestinian Authority cut ties with the Trump administration over the "Deal of the Century," which it viewed as pro-Israel and unbalanced. Subsequently, the PA found itself isolated from developments in the Middle East and excluded from contacts with countries that normalized their relations with Israel. However, a key lesson the Palestinians have drawn from this dynamic is that it is unwise to ignore a reality unfolding before their eyes and against their wishes; rather, they must choose the lesser evil and present their demands, in the hope that some will be met.

Therefore, the Palestinian Authority adopted a positive—albeit conditional—approach to the Biden initiative. In a July 2023 meeting in Amman between representatives of Mahmoud Abbas and Barbara Leaf, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, they conditioned the promotion of normalization with Israel on fulfillment of the following demands:

- Transfer of parts of Area C, currently under Israeli control, to Palestinian control.
- A complete halt to the construction of new settlements and/or strengthening and support of existing settlements in the West Bank.
- Renewal of Saudi financial aid to the Palestinian Authority, which was completely halted in 2020 after reductions began in 2016. At its peak, this aid amounted to approximately $200 million.
- Reopening of the American consulate in East Jerusalem, which was closed during the first Trump administration when the U.S. embassy was moved

from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem. Biden struggled to fulfill his promise on this issue, in part due to opposition in the U.S. Congress.

- Renewal of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under American mediation, beginning from the point where talks ended during Secretary of State John Kerry's term (2013–2014).

From the American perspective, these demands are excessive. However, from the PA's standpoint, they are a necessary evil due to its limited room for maneuver and its need to strengthen its internal position. Given statements and signals from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other senior Saudis before October 2023, the train may leave the station and once again leave the PA alone, weak, and powerless against Hamas—which, even before October 7, had established an image as a viable governing alternative.

Since October 7, the cards have been reshuffled. Normalization has not been taken off the table, but the ability to realize it is impractical under the conditions of an ongoing war. The Palestinian issue, which Israel and the Saudis regarded before October 7 as little more than lip service to fulfill obligations toward the Palestinians and the international community, has returned to the agenda in a manner where ignoring it might, from an Arab perspective, be seen as an injustice to the Palestinians and a violation of the official Arab position. Therefore, any pursuit of normalization requires the formulation of a broad and complex package that takes into account the new reality in the Israeli–Palestinian arena and the region as a whole, and satisfies, to the extent possible, the interests of the parties involved.

The Palestinian Authority, still shaken by the disaster that Hamas brought upon the residents of the Gaza Strip and on the Palestinian cause, distances itself from Hamas, its actions, and its war. However, it remains passive and hesitant in the face of political initiatives such as the normalization initiative. Its many spokespersons often harshly criticize Hamas in Arab broadcast and print media—particularly those affiliated with moderate states—in part

to undermine public sympathy for Hamas and its image as a "liberation movement." In addition, Iran is accused of sowing division within Palestinian society and interfering in matters not its own.

An initiative placed on the regional agenda by President Biden included an effort to overcome the obstacle to normalization created by the war and the significant Israeli barriers that have emerged since October 7. The Biden administration formulated a plan to "revive" the Palestinian Authority, which would allow it to become acceptable to Israel, return to representing the Palestinian people, and take responsibility for Gaza the day after the war. This is not merely a matter of improving the Authority's performance, but also its public image—a move that, in the view of Abbas and his inner circle, may harm their status and force them to relinquish assets. Therefore, they are not enthusiastic about the idea, but lack the power to openly oppose it. For its part, the Israeli government has opposed the PA's return to power in the Gaza Strip since the war began, and some of its ministers have even openly expressed intentions to reoccupy the Strip and reestablish Israeli settlements there.

As for Saudi Arabia, since October 7, Riyadh's public commitment to the Palestinian issue has increased, and its spokespersons frequently present Israeli agreement to the establishment of a Palestinian state as a condition for advancing normalization. The Saudi Crown Prince has repeatedly referred to the Arab Peace Initiative and clarified that it is the proper framework for achieving normalization. However, this commitment appears to be waning as the war between Israel and Hamas continues with no end in sight. Saudi interests—foremost among them the desire to establish a defense alliance with the United States—seem to outweigh its interest in promoting a solution to the Palestinian issue. At the same time, the United States is unlikely to give up on the regional package, which includes renewal of the political process for resolving the Palestinian issue, and may instead move forward with a separate agreement with Riyadh.

The Palestinian Authority will determine its position regarding Israeli–Saudi normalization after the war in Gaza, largely guided by the Israeli position on one hand and Hamas's standing on the other. If Israel continues to oppose including the PA in managing Gaza's affairs, the United States will struggle to advance the normalization process. And if Hamas retains some of its strength and is seen by parts of the public as a viable alternative, the PA will be unable to return to Gaza—and therefore will also be unable to once again represent all Palestinians in political dialogue. It is likely that growing criticism of Hamas by Palestinian intellectuals and Fatah members, along with rising anger among Gaza's residents, will help the PA in its efforts to reintegrate into the Strip "the day after." However, any inter-organizational reconciliation, if achieved, that does not include a change in Hamas' hold on power—or what remains of it—will make it difficult for the U.S., Israel, and even Saudi Arabia to advance the normalization process.

It seems that the Palestinian Authority is currently placing its hopes in two tracks. The first is continuing the struggle in the international arena to gain more recognition and membership in as many international institutions as possible, in order to establish diplomatic realities that place the Palestinian state in a position from which neither Israel nor the United States can ignore it. This effort involves coordination with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states and relies on their commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state, which has increased significantly following the war. The second track is political change in the United States and Israel, which could allow for improved communication between the Israeli government and the U.S. administration and possibly greater openness to the Palestinian issue—so that the "revitalized" Palestinian Authority can more easily participate in shaping "the day after" in Gaza and in future discussions, when they begin, on normalization and its implications for the future of the Palestinian cause.

HAMAS AND THE NORMALIZATION PROCESS—MORE OF THE SAME

KOBI MICHAEL*

The normalization process rests on two rationales or conventions related to the legitimacy of the very existence of the State of Israel. The first is recognition of Israel's existence and its acceptance as a state in the region. The second is recognition of the importance of Israel's integration into the region and its essential role in a new regional architecture, within which—and under American auspices—a camp of stable and moderate states would be formed.

The early signs of the normalization process can be identified in the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979), which at the time of signing was the most important Arab state in the region, and later in the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. In those years, open relations began to emerge between Israel and various Arab and Muslim states, alongside less overt ties with other countries. The Abraham Accords (2020), formulated with Saudi support, laid the foundation for a new regional architecture. Israeli–Saudi normalization was expected to be the crown jewel—solidifying a new regional architecture as a basis for enhanced military cooperation (even if not a formal defense alliance), economic and political collaboration, and a broader framework for addressing the Palestinian issue.

The new regional architecture, backed and led by the United States, whose components include pragmatic Sunni Arab states aligned with the U.S. and the West, alongside the State of Israel, is intended to serve as a counter-axis to the radical "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and to weaken it. The goal is to

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thwart Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and the destructive capacities of its proxies.

Hamas is a central component of the radical axis, supported militarily, economically, in intelligence, and politically by Iran—even if not necessarily in the same manner as Iran's other proxies. This is because Hamas is not a militia created by and under the auspices of Iran; its roots are inherently Palestinian. Hamas' alignment with Iran dates back to the early 2000s and was led by Khaled Mashal as head of Hamas's political bureau, which was based in Syria.

Since 2017, Hamas' leadership has developed a multi-front strategy against Israel, aligned with Iran's "ring of fire" logic. In practice, the shared motivation of Iran and Hamas to destroy Israel bridges religious and other differences between them and underpins their military, intelligence, technological, and economic cooperation—including the planning, albeit not down to the exact details or timing, of the October 7, 2023 attack. This was conceived as a strategic move to trigger a multi-front assault on Israel, stretch it to the point of collapse, and derail the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which they view as a strategic threat—one that would severely undermine their ability to advance the vision of Israel's destruction.

Hamas as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has, from its founding, denied the right of the State of Israel to exist, and has declared in its charter the intention to destroy it. Throughout its existence, Hamas has worked to build its capabilities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, while also developing capabilities outside the Palestinian territories. The organization's significant leap in translating its religious and nationalist ideology can be identified in June 2007, when it violently seized control of the Gaza Strip and became its de facto sovereign. Since 2007, Hamas has invested most of its resources in building its military capabilities—above and below ground—and patiently and persistently strengthening its ties with Iran

to draw on its assistance in building a terrorist army and preparing it for a "Day of Reckoning," which arrived on October 7, 2023.

Alongside its efforts to strengthen ties with Iran, Hamas also successfully brought Qatar into its orbit. In 2012, against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, Hamas–Iran relations entered a crisis due to Hamas' support for the rebels against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Hamas' external leadership was forced to leave Syria and relocated to Qatar. The relationship between Hamas and Qatar grew stronger after 2017, when Ismail Haniyeh was elected head of Hamas' political bureau and Yahya Sinwar was elected leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Qatar hosted Hamas' external leadership on its soil with royal honors, provided it with a security umbrella and freedom of action, gave financial support to Hamas in Gaza, and enlisted the Al Jazeera network—owned and controlled by Qatar—to amplify Hamas' messaging during periods of calm, and especially in times of war. Qatari support became one of Hamas' most important strategic assets, providing economic and political backing thanks to Qatar's immense wealth, its unique regional status, and its proximity to the United States.

Under Erdoğan, Turkey saw itself as a patron of Hamas, seen as a sister movement to the ruling AKP party. The patronage it provided was part of a broader Turkish policy seeking a greater foothold in the Palestinian arena and expanded regional influence as part of its aspiration to establish itself as a regional power. Turkish support manifested in financial aid to Hamas and later in the form of the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla to Gaza, which led to a severe crisis in Turkish–Israeli relations. Turkey hosted Hamas operatives on its soil, including some released in the 2011 Shalit deal, and assisted them in establishing a forward command center in Istanbul, including through the provision of Turkish passports and cooperation from Turkish intelligence. Many Palestinians who fled Gaza over the years found refuge and a future in Turkey, which was willing to receive them. Since the October 7 attack, Turkey has intensified its rhetoric against Israel to the point of accusing it

of war crimes and equating it with the Nazi regime. Simultaneously, Turkey has ramped up its humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and is extending broad support to Hamas and its leadership.

The Abraham Accords were a thorn in Hamas' side. In the organization's view, normalization entrenches regional recognition of Israel and, worse, such recognition translates into deeper Israeli integration into the region, which enhances its security and expands its influence. The Hamas leadership viewed the agreements as a betrayal of the Palestinians and a threat to its own standing and influence.

The Palestinian Authority also opposed the Abraham Accords, saw them as a betrayal of the Palestinians, and identified them as a direct continuation of President Trump's "Deal of the Century" (2020), which it rejected with disdain. However, unlike Hamas, the PA limited its response to condemnation and diplomatic protest, whereas Hamas actively and violently opposed them. The October 7 attack is the clearest and most extreme expression of that course of action.

The Biden administration's accelerated effort to promote normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia disturbed Iran and Hamas more than anything else. The administration's efforts and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's willingness to implement normalization were, in their eyes, a tipping point. Saudi Arabia's regional status and its significance in the Islamic world make normalization with Israel a formative strategic event—one that could fundamentally restructure the Middle East and create a counter-axis to the radical Axis of Resistance led by Iran and its proxies.

Hamas' position, expressed in numerous statements by its senior leadership—including a prominent one by Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau (to Al Mayadeen in August 2023)—focused on preparing for a regional war to liberate Palestine. The implementation of normalization may be the final nail in the coffin of Palestinian resistance and the vision of liberating all of Palestine and destroying Israel. Fears that

normalization would strengthen Israel, allowing it—under Saudi approval—to offer only vague statements about the future of a Palestinian state, along with concerns about the weakening of Iran's position as a regional power and the diminishing role of Qatar as Hamas' patron due to its marginalization in the new regional architecture, convinced Hamas leadership that it was time to derail the process. From there, the path to the October 7 attack was short.

Hamas' opposition to any normalization with Israel is existential for the organization. The expansion of normalization threatens its preservation as a significant political actor in the Palestinian arena and its ability to rebuild militarily and politically after and as a result of the war with Israel in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, in Hamas' view, normalization may accelerate the resolution of the Palestinian issue as part of the construction of a new regional architecture, in which it is clear that the partners to this new framework prefer the Palestinian Authority and Fatah over Hamas, and will use their considerable influence to thwart Hamas' recovery and its integration into any future Palestinian leadership. The weakening of Hamas following Israel's response to the October 7 attack and the possibility that it will lose its grip on Gaza greatly diminish its ability to significantly disrupt the renewal of the normalization process.

In order to foster greater prospects for advancing normalization, Hamas' governmental and military capabilities must be dismantled, and it must be prevented from regaining sovereignty in the Gaza Strip. Damaging Hamas in this way would also weaken Iran and its proxies, and thereby reduce their potential to harm this vital normalization process.

BETWEEN CONCERN AND HOPE: SAUDI–ISRAELI NORMALIZATION IN THE EYES OF EGYPT AND JORDAN

OFIR WINTER*

Egypt and Jordan were the first Arab states to establish peace with Israel—in 1979 and 1994, respectively. For this reason, they find it difficult to oppose outright other Arab countries that follow in their footsteps and join the circle of peace and normalization, even when they are not fully comfortable with their actions. It is no coincidence that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was the first to welcome the Abraham Accords, despite the Palestinian component being more limited than Cairo would have liked. Egypt also joined the Negev Forum (which convened in 2022 and included the foreign ministers of Israel, Egypt, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain), even though the Palestinian Authority and Jordan were absent.

At the same time, from the Israeli–Jordanian peace treaty through to the Abraham Accords, Egyptian support for Arab–Israeli normalization processes has been ambivalent, cautious, and marked by concern. On one hand, Egypt drew satisfaction from the fact that other Arab states were adopting the path of peace. On the other, it feared losing its exclusivity in managing Arab peace relations with Israel, erosion of its leading status in the Middle East, Israel's growing regional stature and influence and its new Arab peace partners at Egypt's expense, and the imposition of a "warm peace" model that diverges from Egypt's traditional model of "cold peace."

Beyond this, Egypt is concerned about normalization that bypasses the Palestinian issue. This concern is relevant to the possibility of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and it appears that the Swords of Iron war has strengthened Egyptian support for conditioning progress on a substantial

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and binding Palestinian component, which Saudi Arabia is also expected to demand as part of any agreement. Egypt is not interested in a separate Israeli–Saudi deal that would be a direct continuation of the Abraham Accords—which, in its view, did not deliver sufficient benefits to the Palestinians—but rather prefers normalization that is contingent on a clear and binding Israeli commitment to a two-state solution, even if gradual and phased.

In addition, Egypt sees Israeli–Saudi normalization as a way to turn the crisis in the Gaza Strip into an opportunity to shape a more stable regional order, weaken Hamas, return the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, prevent the threatening scenario of mass displacement of Gazans into the Sinai Peninsula, and provide Israel with an incentive to end the war. The ongoing war has exacted a heavy economic toll on Egypt (including a 60% drop in Suez Canal traffic and an estimated tens of percentage points decline in tourism), and has made it clear that the continuation of the current situation threatens vital Egyptian interests. According to a UN report published on May 8, 2024, the war is expected to cost the Egyptian treasury between $5.5 and $20 billion, depending on the scenario. Normalization that would end the war is therefore an opportunity for redress—or at the very least, damage control. Furthermore, Egypt sees normalization as a potential avenue for regional integration that could benefit it in the areas of security, tourism, and energy, and help establish a more secure, prosperous, and interconnected Middle East—with Egypt as a central player.

Still, Egypt has a number of reservations that could diminish its support for Saudi–Israeli normalization—or even turn it into a spoiler—if not properly addressed. Firstly, it is closely monitoring with concern the plans to create competing trade routes to the Suez Canal from Asia, through the Gulf, to Israel and Europe. Egypt also does not share the position of Israel—and possibly of some Gulf states—on the creation of an anti-Iranian regional military coalition centered on Israel and the United States. Egyptian public opinion toward Israel is very negative, especially in the wake of the war; the

United States is seen as an unreliable actor that prioritizes Israeli interests over Arab ones; and Iran is viewed as the preferred party with which to reach understandings, in order to reduce regional polarization and avoid direct confrontation. This position is reflected, among other things, in the slow rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran since late 2021 and in Egypt's preference to reach understandings with Iran and the Houthis in the Red Sea rather than join a U.S.-led coalition against them.

As for Jordan, the Abraham Accords were formed and signed over its head, bypassing it and ignoring its hope of becoming the central geographic link between Israel and the Gulf states. Moreover, the Accords fulfilled the "warm" economic peace that King Hussein had hoped to establish with Israel in order to reap material benefits that would transform the Kingdom, but which had been neglected over the years in favor of focusing on security cooperation.

However, like Egypt, Jordan has gradually come to understand that it has something to gain from normalization agreements between Israel and the Gulf states, and it has attempted to cautiously integrate into the emerging regional order. One example of this is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in November 2022 at the UN Climate Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, under the sponsorship of the UAE, around the "Prosperity" project ("water for electricity"), which was supposed to become a formal agreement at the Climate Conference held in Dubai in December 2023, but was suspended by Jordan following the war between Israel and Hamas.

Regarding normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, prior to the Swords of Iron war, concerns and reservations were voiced from the Jordanian side. A key issue troubling Jordan was the possibility of a Saudi–Israeli agreement that ignored the resolution of the Palestinian issue, which directly affects Jordan's national security due to the dominant Palestinian component in its population. From Jordan's perspective, the absence of a stable solution to the Palestinian issue increases the risk of internal unrest in the Kingdom and leaves an opening for the realization of the "alternative homeland"

scheme at its expense. Therefore, Saudi–Israeli normalization is perceived in Amman—just as in Cairo and other Arab capitals—as the last significant point of pressure that the Arab states can exert to extract concessions from Israel on the Palestinian issue.

Another major concern raised previously in Jordan regarding Israeli–Saudi normalization is the potential cancellation or erosion of its special custodianship status over Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, and the damage to Israel's commitment to prioritize Jordan's historical role in a final-status agreement, as anchored in Article 9 of the peace treaty. Jordan suspects that Israel wishes to use normalization with Saudi Arabia to strip it of its status in the city, and also harbors suspicions regarding Saudi Arabia's intentions: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is seen in Jordan as an ambitious leader who might not be content with his role as custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina and may seek, as part of a future normalization deal, to extend his authority to Islam's third holiest site—Jerusalem. Jordan's mistrust of Saudi Arabia is also fueled by past tensions between the two royal houses.

Israeli–Saudi normalization is expected to trigger public protests in Jordan, especially among Islamist elements. The Islamic Action Front party—the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan—achieved notable electoral success in the September 2024 parliamentary elections, becoming the largest party with 31 out of 138 seats and winning 41 percent of the vote on the national list. Its success was attributed to its ability to reflect prevailing public sentiment in Jordan during the war in Gaza. Although the Islamist opposition currently lacks a parliamentary majority, its growing public and political influence is expected to bolster its oppositional stance on normalization and reduce the monarchy's room for maneuver.

Despite concerns and difficulties, Jordan—like Egypt—is expected to see Israeli–Saudi normalization as a potential gateway to ending the war between Israel and Hamas, which has negatively affected Jordan as well. Iran and Islamist, pro-Iranian actors have fueled domestic unrest in the Kingdom throughout

the war, incited jihad against Israel from Jordanian territory, and have in effect violated Jordan's sovereignty. In contrast, Israeli–Saudi normalization would deal a blow to the regional Axis of Resistance that threatens the Kingdom. Additionally, the war has taken an economic toll on Jordan—mainly due to reduced maritime traffic to the Gulf of Aqaba and damage to tourism—and has underscored the importance of achieving a stable resolution. Moreover, Israeli–Saudi normalization holds potential for regional integration that could benefit Jordan, which has been quietly operating a land bridge from the Gulf to Israel during the war despite public protests on the matter.

In conclusion, Egypt and Jordan support Israeli–Saudi normalization in principle, but this support is cautious and conditional. The main tool available to both states to thwart or delay normalization, should its form not be to their liking, would be an attempt to compel Saudi Arabia to adopt an Arab peace initiative approved by the Arab League—or at the very least by a group of Arab states and the Palestinian Authority. This would enable them to pressure Riyadh to condition normalization on "Palestinian" components that Israel would likely find difficult to accept, such as the immediate establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, evacuation of settlements, and concessions on security arrangements.

At the same time, even if Egypt and Jordan do not fully endorse Israeli–Saudi normalization, they will find it difficult to openly oppose the American patron of the deal and its Saudi partner. While the United States provides both countries with generous annual military and economic aid, Saudi Arabia announced in March 2024 a $15 billion investment in the tourism sector in Egypt's Red Sea Governorate. Moreover, remittances from Egyptian workers in Saudi Arabia amount to approximately $8.3 billion annually. Such dependency reduces Egypt and Jordan's ability to oppose a future normalization agreement—whatever its form may be—and increases the likelihood that they will choose to support and integrate into it, provided that their needs are taken into account and that they too stand to benefit from it.

THE POSITIONS OF THE UAE AND BAHRAIN ON ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION: PARTNERSHIP AND COMPETITION

ILAN ZALAYET AND YOEL GUZANSKY*

As signatories to the Abraham Accords, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain are expected to support an Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement, which does not contradict the Abraham Accords and even complements them. Moreover, these countries have pro-American leaderships that maintain neighborly and friendly relations with Saudi Arabia—especially Bahrain, which relies on Riyadh as its patron. That said, various considerations will guide both states in assessing their positions if and when such an agreement is signed, including their relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and even Iran—and in Bahrain's case, its internal political situation.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE's central national goals—similar to those of Saudi Arabia—are calm and stability, which will allow it to continue using its oil revenues for internal economic development and prosperity. Against this backdrop, and especially as the pioneer of the Abraham Accords, the UAE's official position is that these agreements should be expanded to include additional countries. It is likely that the UAE believes such expansion would grant further legitimacy to its own normalization with Israel. This position was expressed, without explicitly naming Saudi Arabia, at the Negev Forum held in January 2023 and at the UAE Security Forum in July 2022. Even after the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war in October 2023, the chairman of the UAE's National Defense and Foreign Relations Committee, Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, stated that

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in his country's view, the Abraham Accords are not limited to the UAE and Israel, but are a platform that should reshape the region "so that everyone enjoys security, stability, and prosperity."

This does not mean that Israeli–Saudi normalization would not arouse envy and competition among the Emirati leadership, as it would lose its uniqueness as the trailblazer of normalization and model for its success. There may be concern in Abu Dhabi that Israel will prioritize its relationship with Riyadh over its ties with Abu Dhabi. In addition, the UAE is engaged in a "cold" rivalry with Saudi Arabia (possibly even on a personal level, between their leaders Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman) over political stature and economic influence. In particular, the Saudis are attempting to attract a share of the companies, foreign investments, and tourism currently enjoyed by the UAE—especially by the emirate of Dubai, which over the years has become a global economic, commercial, and tourism hub. Furthermore, in the case of Israeli–Saudi normalization, the UAE would lose its unique status within the region in terms of ties with Israel and Washington and as a constructive actor in promoting stability and peace in the Middle East. Abu Dhabi would also lose the relative advantage it has in its economic competition with Saudi Arabia, stemming from its trade with Israel and Israeli tourism.

However, these are not costs the UAE cannot bear, particularly if it can leverage an Israeli–Saudi agreement to enhance its diplomatic prestige in the region and the world—as a state whose path even the great Saudi Arabia is following. The litmus test for how such an agreement might be received in Abu Dhabi is the nature of the Israeli concessions to the Palestinians—and no less important, the American concessions to the Saudis—namely, whether these are more impressive than those achieved by the UAE in 2020. In any case, the UAE is unlikely to resent Israeli–Saudi normalization even if it is advanced with a more prominent Palestinian component than that of the Abraham Accords. Evidence of this position can be found in remarks made by senior diplomat and advisor to the UAE President, Dr. Anwar Gargash, in

September 2023, who stated that the Abraham Accords were not intended to resolve the Palestinian issue.

On the other hand, the UAE may demand from the United States "parity" in weapons systems—and more significantly, in nuclear permissions that Saudi Arabia might receive in exchange for its relationship with Israel. Reportedly, Riyadh is demanding from the United States permission to maintain a nuclear capability far more expansive than the "gold standard" agreement that Abu Dhabi signed with Washington in 2009 (which significantly impedes progress toward military nuclear capabilities). If Riyadh receives approval from Washington for uranium enrichment on its soil, the UAE may seek to reopen its agreement with the U.S. on the matter, which could raise fears of a regional nuclear arms race and complicate U.S. congressional approval of Israeli–Saudi normalization. A hint of this can be seen in a tender the UAE issued in 2024 for the construction of additional nuclear reactors—signaling that it will no longer rely solely on South Korea—which is subject to U.S. oversight—as was the case with the construction of its first four reactors, but is now opening the door to potential participation by Chinese and Russian firms.

Above all, the UAE is likely to be preoccupied with the response of Iran and its proxies to Israeli–Saudi normalization, particularly if it includes a U.S.–Saudi defense agreement that Iran will perceive as a threat. While Abu Dhabi still views Iran and its proxies as its primary security threat—and even seeks to expand the security agreement it signed with the U.S. in September 2024—it does not wish to disrupt its reconciliation process with Tehran, which it has worked hard to establish. It understands that regional conflicts will harm it even if it does not participate directly. A concrete threat to the UAE in this context is the collapse of the ceasefire in Yemen if Saudi Arabia signs a normalization agreement with Israel without first securing a stable peace with the Houthis. Such a collapse could lead to the Houthis seizing strategic areas in southern Yemen currently controlled by UAE-backed forces—and

in an extreme scenario, could even result in Houthi missiles fire toward the UAE, as occurred in early 2022.

Bahrain

The national interests of Bahrain, the second Gulf state to normalize relations with Israel, focus on preserving the survival of the regime, ensuring its stability, and achieving economic prosperity. The Bahraini government does not possess the same economic strength as its counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, and unlike them, it does not enjoy broad public support—particularly from the Shiite majority population, which is alienated from the Sunni royal family. Bahrain's decision-making is driven by a constant fear of popular uprising, as occurred during the Arab Spring in 2011, and of Iran, which supports segments of the Shiite opposition in the kingdom. Bahrain is the only Gulf state that has yet to renew ties with Tehran after it and other Gulf states severed relations in 2016. Under these circumstances, Bahrain has effectively become a protectorate of Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent, of the UAE. Both have provided economic support to the regime in Manama and even deployed military forces to suppress the 2011 uprising. In addition, Bahrain maintains close ties with the United States for protection from Iran: It hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, and was in fact the first Gulf state to sign a comprehensive security agreement with the United States in September 2023, which did not require congressional approval.

Accordingly, at the governmental level, Bahrain is expected to support any initiative led by its Saudi patron and would particularly welcome a Saudi–American defense agreement that would bolster Washington's security presence in the Gulf, as Bahrain has a vital interest in strengthening the Saudi regime. Indeed, an op-ed in Bahrain's state-affiliated Al-Bilad newspaper in February 2024 argued that "despite Israel's crimes in Gaza," Gulf states should continue the normalization process with Israel as a means of ensuring security and stability, given Iran's threats and influence in the region, and in light of shifts

in U.S. Middle East policy. Manama's only request, also expressed in a state-affiliated newspaper article, is that the United States assist it in addressing internal threats and not prevent Bahrain or Saudi Arabia from dealing with such threats on the grounds of human rights violations (in this context, the article noted the Obama administration's condemnation of the suppression of protests in Bahrain in 2011).

Among the public in Bahrain, however, the picture is quite different. The majority of the kingdom's citizens oppose normalization with Israel: a 2022 poll found that only about twenty percent supported it, with no distinction between Sunnis and Shiites—and that figure has likely dropped further due to the war in Gaza. Whereas about forty percent of Bahrainis believed normalization would have a positive impact when the agreement was first signed, that number halved within three years. The vocal opposition is led by the popular Shiite opposition movement Al-Wefaq (which has been outlawed and whose leaders have been arrested or exiled), which also appeals to publics in other countries considering normalization. The movement's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Isa Qassim, who resides in Iran, described the Hamas attack on October 7, as a lesson to governments normalizing with Israel—one that shattered the illusion of Israeli power, and thus the supposed need for normalization, which he said contradicts religious faith.

Furthermore, the Bahraini opposition has long viewed Saudi Arabia and U.S. forces in the Gulf as enablers of the Bahraini regime's human rights abuses and obstacles to reform and liberalization (regarding Saudi Arabia, the 2011 suppressions of protest served to reinforce this view). Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, it has been argued that ties with Israel also serve this purpose, due to the rapid cooperation formed between the Bahraini government and Israel. In the small but persistent protests by Al-Wefaq supporters in Bahrain, the demand to end internal repression is coupled with calls to sever relations with Israel. Therefore, an agreement that deepens military ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia—especially if it includes Israel, but even if it

does not—may be perceived by many Bahrainis as a threat to their freedom and could lead to vocal protests.

However, neither the Bahraini public nor the opposition holds the power to derail an agreement signed by Saudi Arabia, just as they have not threatened or disrupted Bahrain's normalization with Israel thus far. The Bahraini regime frequently claims that Iranian Revolutionary Guards are operating among the Shiite population in the country, but it is unclear how accurate these claims are or whether they primarily serve as a pretext for suppressing the opposition. During the Swords of Iron war, an unknown organization called the "Al-Ashtar Brigades"—which presents itself as a Bahraini militia affiliated with the Axis of Resistance—released a video of a drone launch from Bahrain toward Israel in response to the war in Gaza, and called on Bahraini citizens to attack Israeli diplomatic representatives in the kingdom. However, it appears that the video was not filmed in Bahrain, and it is unlikely that there is any armed group or effective Iranian infiltration in the country capable of disrupting Saudi normalization efforts with Israel.

QATAR AND ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION

YOEL GUZANSKY AND ILAN ZALAYET*

Qatar's primary national priority is to consolidate an independent and ostensibly neutral position that protects it from the influence and penetration of external powers—chiefly its larger neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Qatar addresses this challenge by hosting the largest U.S. military base in the region (the regional headquarters of CENTCOM – U.S. Central Command), which serves as a kind of insurance policy and allows it to hedge between regional powers. In particular, over the years Qatar has distinguished itself from the policies and dictates of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries—led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE—partly by maintaining good relations with their rivals, Iran and Turkey. This approach has generated tensions that, between 2017 and 2021, escalated into a Gulf boycott of Qatar, which ended when Riyadh and Abu Dhabi renewed ties with it. Nevertheless, the neutrality that Qatar has carefully cultivated, along with its considerable wealth, has enabled it to play the role of mediator between rival parties and to build trust with adversaries—providing it with relative insulation from the effects of international conflicts. Although not all of Qatar's mediation efforts have been successful, it has gained substantial international prestige that bolsters its stability and security.

One of the central areas in which Qatar differentiates itself from Saudi Arabia and the UAE is its ongoing and active support for the Palestinian cause—primarily through funding Hamas and hosting the group's leadership—as well as through its opposition to normalization with Israel in the absence of progress toward a permanent resolution of the Palestinian issue. (It is

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worth noting that Qatar was also the only Arab country to oppose the Assad regime in Syria due to its crimes against humanity, despite the fact that most Arab states, including Gulf countries, normalized relations with his regime starting in 2018.)

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Qatar was the pioneer among Gulf states in establishing ties with Israel, with a permanent Israeli mission already operating there in 1996. After the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, Qatar appeared to be Israel's next political target in the normalization wave, but Qatar sharply criticized the accords, calling them nothing less than a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Since then, Qatar has emphasized its adherence to the Arab Peace Initiative and insists it will not join any agreements unless a resolution between Israel and the Palestinians is achieved. Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman even stated that Qatar would only join the Abraham Accords "if Israel demonstrates seriousness in resolving the two-state solution." At the same time, Qatar operates below the threshold of public agreement and maintains "working relations" with Israel beyond the Gaza context (since it is a key channel for communicating with Hamas). For example, economic ties exist between Israel and Qatar, including in the diamond sector, and the emirate allowed Israeli tourists to attend the FIFA World Cup matches.

On the other hand, Qatar is also likely concerned about the formalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia—a move that could isolate it, despite the thaw in its relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In particular, Doha would view negatively any U.S.–Saudi agreement that enhances Saudi Arabia's military and political power—still a central threat to Qatar—and that displaces its own unique proximity to the United States. This closeness is reflected not only in hosting the largest U.S. military base in the region, but also in Qatar's mediation role between Washington and various actors, including Iran, as well as in Doha's involvement in efforts to promote a ceasefire in the Gaza war and a deal between Israel and Hamas to release the Israeli

hostages still held by Hamas. Qatar's relationship with the United States is close: as early as 2022, the U.S. designated Qatar a Major Non-NATO Ally—a status not yet granted to either the UAE or Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's central instrument of influence is its media and information empire, which includes media outlets and research centers that target both Arab and international audiences. This system currently serves as a platform for voices opposing normalization with Israel and is likely to intensify its activity should such an agreement come to fruition. Following the easing of tensions between Doha and Riyadh in 2021, direct criticism of the Saudi regime in Qatari media has diminished, and instead, criticism focuses on discrediting the idea of normalization with Israel itself, in both the Saudi and broader Arab context. Central narratives include that relations with Israel give Arab regimes more tools to violate rights; that normalization agreements serve to improve the image of Arab rulers rather than promote genuine peace; that the agreements are driven by the power of Israeli–Jewish influence in the U.S.; that U.S. involvement in the Middle East has been destructive; and that Israel is internally troubled and on the verge of collapse. At the same time, any potential U.S.–Saudi agreement discussed in Qatari media outlets includes normalization with Israel.

Qatar also promotes its image of support for the Palestinians throughout the region and globally via Al Jazeera and other media platforms it owns—setting itself apart from Arab regimes, which are often seen by the public as having abandoned the Palestinians in favor of Israel and the U.S. Therefore, as it did when the Abraham Accords were signed, Qatar is expected to maintain its stance that no Muslim state should normalize ties with Israel without a solution for the Palestinians. In fact, Israeli–Saudi normalization may improve Qatar's image as a country that remains committed to Palestinian rights and attuned to public sentiment.

However, it is clear that Qatar will find it difficult to openly oppose Israeli–Saudi normalization if it is U.S.-sponsored. Qatar will also find it difficult to

oppose Saudi Arabia if it decides to move forward with normalization with Israel—especially if the agreement between Jerusalem and Riyadh includes a commitment to advance a political process with the Palestinians.

From Israel's perspective, Qatar's identification with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its negative stance toward Israel, arouse suspicion regarding its willingness to help in matters that serve Israeli interests. Although Israel maintains normal working relations with Qatar, including among military and intelligence officials, "the Qatari dilemma" occupies the Israeli system—especially in light of Qatar's negative role (even if coordinated with and encouraged by the Israeli government) in transferring funds that significantly contributed to Hamas's military buildup. Another source of discomfort in Israel is Qatar's funding of U.S. universities that promote anti-Israel agendas.

In conclusion, Qatar's position outside the regional normalization wave with Israel will almost certainly make it an oppositional actor, likely to try to undermine the process—primarily through the cognitive warfare of its media empire. On the other hand, significant progress toward resolving the Palestinian issue, if it accompanies Israeli–Saudi normalization, would make it easier for Qatar to renew ties with Israel and, in doing so, to take steps with potential positive implications for Israel's security.

IRAQ AND SAUDI–ISRAELI NORMALIZATION—THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC DYNAMICS AND RELATIONS WITH IRAN

YARON SCHNEIDER*

Unlike its Gulf neighbors, Iraq has not been ruled by a single leader since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 and the establishment of a democratic system led by a government, parliament, and president. These institutions are chosen through a process that provides proportional representation to the ethnic and sectarian groups comprising Iraqi society (Shi'ites, Kurds, Sunnis, and smaller minorities), based on their relative size within the population.

As a result, the formulation of Iraq's domestic and foreign policy is shaped by its multi-sectarian demographic makeup and by the ideologies or political currents that dominate the major communities—especially when it comes to contentious inter-sectarian issues such as relations with Israel and the prospect of regional normalization with it. A majority of Iraq's citizens (60–70 percent) belong to the Shi'ite sect, granting them a built-in advantage in determining parliamentary election outcomes and, by extension, the composition of the government, which must secure the parliament's confidence.

The current government in Baghdad (which received parliamentary approval in October 2022) was formed by the "Coordination Framework"—a coalition of representatives from Shi'ite militias that support Iranian regime policy and operate under its patronage. Given the nature of this government, the likelihood of Iraqi–Israeli normalization—similar to the Abraham Accords—is extremely low, if not outright impossible.

On the other hand, Iraq's sectarian diversity and the various political currents that have emerged in its democratic system also provide fertile ground for political opposition to the current pro-Iranian ruling coalition, and may even

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contain the seeds of protest and disengagement from the "Iranian order" in Iraq—including expressions of support for normalization with Israel.

For example, in October 2019, a socio-economic protest erupted across Iraq against the government. In addition to demands for political and economic reform to combat corruption and the suppression of freedoms, the protests also included expressions of opposition to the Iranian regime's interference in the country—particularly among young Shi'ites in Baghdad and the southern provinces—who led demonstrations and clashes reminiscent of the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square at the beginning of the Arab Spring. In their slogans and public statements, the Iraqi protesters directed their criticism not only at the government, its corruption, and its failure to address fundamental economic issues (such as rising unemployment), but also at Iranian interference in state governance—especially regarding the Shi'ite militias, who receive weapons and funding from Iran and constrain the democratic institutions of the Iraqi state.

While this social protest was primarily concerned with Iraq's internal situation, its focus on the issue of relations with Iran also sparked a broader discussion on a critical regional matter that deeply affects Iraq: its involvement in the Iranian-led Shi'ite axis. Questions arose as to whether Iraq should remain part of this axis under Iranian influence and pay the price for it—or, as reflected in some protesters' chants ("Iran out"), whether it should disengage from the Iranian–Shi'ite camp, prioritize Iraq's national interests, and maintain balanced relations with its neighbors—especially Saudi Arabia, Iran's chief rival in the Gulf—on regional issues such as the conflict with Israel, so that Iraq does not come to share the fate of Lebanon.

Against this background, and as a continuation of the discussion on Iraq's social and political diversity in the current era, there have been signs in recent years of support in Iraq for normalization with Israel. This has included unofficial delegations of "Sunni, Shi'ite, and local leaders" from Iraq visiting Israel in 2018, with the help of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well

as attempts to generate a broader and more open public discussion about normalization.

The most notable example of this was the "Conference for Peace and Recovery," held in Erbil in September 2021 under the auspices of the Center for Peace Communications, a New York-based American organization. However, this was a unique event that does not reflect the full spectrum of political opinion in Iraq today. The uniqueness of the conference lies, first, in its location—Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, whose status as an autonomous administrative entity is enshrined in Iraq's constitution, reflecting the Kurds' desire to maintain their identity as a distinct ethnic group. Regarding Israel, there are clear gaps between Iraq's official foreign policy—which does not recognize or maintain relations with Israel—and the policy of the Kurdish region, which in recent years has shown support for Israel, including reports of business ties, especially in the oil trade.

Second, the event was held under the external sponsorship of an American organization promoting dialogue between Arab citizens and Israelis to advance normalization, and was not initiated by the Iraqi government or any official body. According to the Center for Peace Communications, the conference was attended by about 300 Iraqis, including establishment representatives and tribal leaders from across Iraq. The conference centered on a call for peace and partnership with Israel and the Israeli people. The speakers, including a retired Iraqi general, expressed a willingness to recognize Israel and establish peaceful relations. Sahar Karim al-Ta'i, a senior official in the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, was quoted in an interview with the Israeli news site *Times of Israel* as saying: "We will push for peace with Israel until our leaders take action." Naturally, the conference and the pro-normalization statements made during it were harshly condemned by the pro-Iranian militias, and participants were even threatened. The Iraqi government issued arrest warrants for several participants.

Even earlier, pro-Iranian militia activists in Iraq had strongly opposed the Trump administration's push for regional normalization with Israel in 2019–2020, directing their violence in this context against Gulf states. For example, members of the "Hezbollah Brigades" militia stormed the Bahraini embassy in Baghdad following Bahrain's hosting of the economic peace conference in June 2019.

Therefore, during the process of normalization between Israel and the Arab world, following the signing of the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in September 2020, the issue of relations with Israel became a volatile and contentious topic in Iraq. On the one hand, there were signs of support for normalization—mainly among the Kurds or under their auspices, as seen in the Erbil conference of 2021. On the other hand, reactions to normalization efforts by pro-Iranian militias and Shi'ite politicians—some of whom represent those militias, and others, such as Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who in recent years has distanced himself from the pro-Iranian camp—reflected firm opposition among leaders of Iraq's Shi'ite majority to any prospect of normalization with Israel. Additionally, pro-Iranian militias and other opponents of normalization have in recent years accused the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq of maintaining secret ties with Israel (and even with the Mossad). In May 2022, against the backdrop of these internal tensions, Iraq's parliament passed a law that significantly toughened penalties for any engagement with Israel.

Iraq's Relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States, and the Impact of Saudi–Israeli Normalization

At the regional level, over the past decade Iraq has worked to strengthen its ties with the Arab world, particularly with Saudi Arabia, including an improvement in diplomatic relations and a reduction of tensions between the two countries, which have seen decades of ups and downs. For the central government in Baghdad, increasing integration with the Arab sphere—through

cooperation in economic, commercial, and even security fields (as in the fight against ISIS)—is intended to balance Iraq's heavy dependence on Iran, bolster Baghdad's independence, and enhance governmental stability. This occurs in the context of ongoing disagreements among Iraqi leaders and sectarian-political figures over the country's current geopolitical orientation: whether to move eastward—integrating into the Iranian-led Shi'ite axis, as many (though not all) Shi'ite leaders prefer—or westward, as signaled in recent years by several prime ministers and other high-ranking officials (especially Kurds and Sunnis), with the goal of asserting Iraq's independence from the Iranian orbit and improving its international standing. This includes the possibility of participating in the US-led regional coalition, given that Iraq hosts US military forces.

In this regard, the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had a positive effect from Iraq's perspective. The Iraqi government even served as a mediator between the two neighbors in the run-up to their 2023 agreement to restore relations. Easing tensions between Iraq's two bordering powers has also helped de-escalate domestic political and sectarian conflicts and reduced the burden on Iraqi decision-makers—as long as Iran and Saudi Arabia can align on a regional agenda based on diplomacy rather than threats or military moves.

However, when the issue of normalization with Israel arises—particularly the possibility of Saudi Arabia taking such a step in the spirit of the Abraham Accords, as part of a security deal in which the United States would boost military support to Riyadh and thereby strengthen the Saudi-led Arab coalition—Iraq is likely to face another dilemma. Given the past reactions of Shi'ite militias and others to expressions of support for normalization in Iraq or the Gulf, it is unlikely that the Iraqi government will publicly support Saudi or any other Arab normalization with Israel.

Conversely, based on public statements from senior Saudi and American officials, a Saudi–Israeli normalization agreement would likely be part of a

multidimensional deal offering Saudi Arabia significant advantages within the US-backed regional coalition, including military, security, and possibly nuclear-related benefits. If realized, such a deal could strengthen the US military presence in the region—even if Washington ends its counter-ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria within the next two years, as outlined in a September 2024 agreement. In this sense, bolstering the security architecture of the Saudi-led regional coalition in exchange for normalization with Israel could garner support from key power centers in Iraq, including the prime minister, cabinet ministers, and political leaders—particularly Kurds and Sunnis—who have a vested interest in maintaining strong ties with the US, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. This would also serve as a counterbalance to Iran's influence in Baghdad—especially if these ties are not conditional on Iraq itself joining the normalization process with Israel.

Moreover, commercial relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq have gained momentum in recent years due to the thaw in diplomatic ties. In 2020, the Arar land border crossing was reopened after nearly 30 years, and trade volume between the two countries has since grown to over $1.3 billion annually (compared to about $800 million in 2019). In 2023, the Iraqi government signed an agreement with Saudi Aramco to develop the Akkas gas field and another deal to connect Iraq to the Gulf Cooperation Council's electricity grid via a transmission network stretching from northern Saudi Arabia to central Iraq. This deepening economic relationship, along with the potential for expanded regional trade facilitated by Saudi–Israeli normalization—which could open new markets and trade routes for both countries—may encourage the Iraqi central government to support the normalization process indirectly, especially if it leads to economic benefits for Iraq and offsets its dependency on Iran.

Analysis and Summary: Trends Influencing Iraq's Potential Support for Saudi–Israeli Normalization

Iraq's democratic character plays an important role in analyzing its potential responses to Saudi–Israeli normalization. As in any democracy, a uniform reaction cannot be expected. Iraq hosts a range of views on Israel and normalization—shaped by ideology and group identity (e.g., Shi'ites vs. Kurds). While it may be assumed that Shi'ite leaders will reject normalization outright, and Kurdish and other leaders will support it or are willing to express support for regional normalization (as in the Erbil conference), the numerical strength of the Shi'ite majority and the inclusion of pro-Iranian militias in the government in recent years tilt Iraq's official position against normalization.

However, this does not mean that the central government—namely, the prime minister, president, and moderate actors such as the Kurds—will publicly object to Saudi–Israeli normalization, especially if it is part of a broader regional arrangement involving the United States, through which Saudi Arabia receives military and security assistance, or even a defense pact. Such a development could signal to Iran that the US remains committed to its regional allies under the umbrella of an official agreement. This would significantly strengthen Saudi Arabia's security and improve its defense posture against threats posed by the Iranian-led axis, especially if the US is planning to reduce its military footprint in Iraq and reposition itself in the region.

Additionally, regional and international trade or development agreements under the auspices of Saudi–Israeli normalization could enhance Iraq–Saudi economic ties and pave the way for joint regional initiatives—such as trade corridors or shared electricity networks. For Iraq, these are compelling incentives, particularly if they reduce its suffocating economic dependence on Iran.

From Iraq's perspective, the expected regional changes associated with Saudi–Israeli normalization (conditional on a US–Saudi security agreement) may improve Iraq's ability to balance Iranian influence with closer ties to

Saudi Arabia and the broader US-backed Arab coalition. This balance is seen as a strategic interest by domestic actors—chiefly the military and security establishment, along with civilian leaders such as the president, speaker of parliament, and prime minister—who are concerned about the growing power of pro-Iranian militias and Iran's entrenchment through them. Therefore, the security and economic benefits embedded in a Saudi–Israeli normalization agreement, viewed against the backdrop of Iran's drive for regional hegemony, may prompt Iraqi leaders to support such an agreement behind the scenes—even if it does not bring Iraq itself closer to normalization with Israel.

TURKEY AND ITS APPROACH TO SAUDI–ISRAELI NORMALIZATION

GALLIA LINDENSTRAUSS*

Turkey, which was in fact the first Muslim country to normalize relations with Israel back in 1949, is likely to view a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia with skepticism and even disapproval. Its opposition to the Abraham Accords in 2020—and its threat to recall its ambassador from the UAE following their signing—set a precedent in this regard. While relations between Turkey and the Gulf states have improved significantly since then (after years of tension driven by Ankara's support for Qatar during the blockade, and the fallout from the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul), Turkey is still unlikely to look favorably on a Saudi–Israeli normalization deal. Even if such a normalization is accompanied by progress in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, Ankara is expected to perceive it as coming at the Palestinians' expense—particularly due to Saudi Arabia's weight in the Muslim world. Normalization would also enhance the power of Gulf states within the Sunni world and increase Saudi influence in East Jerusalem, potentially threatening Turkey's self-image as a leading Muslim nation with strong support among Palestinians, especially in East Jerusalem.

Moreover, the Swords of Iron war and its aftermath have negatively affected Israel–Turkey relations, to the extent that Turkey is now seen as being closer to the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" than to the countries that have normalized relations with Israel. Particularly notable was Turkey's May 2024 decision to impose a complete trade ban on Israel—despite the existence of a free trade agreement between the two countries and their membership in both the

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World Trade Organization and the OECD. It is unclear whether this reversal can be undone to the point that Turkey could be expected to support initiatives that clearly serve Israel's security, even if they also contribute to Palestinian welfare. This is because Turkey's trade ban on Israel was prompted in part by intense public and political pressure to impose practical sanctions on Israel, rather than offering mere rhetorical condemnation.

In addition, Turkey plays a significant role in promoting anti-Israel narratives through its media outlets, some of which broadcast in Arabic. These channels, along with public statements from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other senior officials, contribute to inflaming hostility toward Israel—hostility that has sharply increased since the war. At times, Ankara's rhetoric has even challenged Israel's very legitimacy. If Turkish–Israeli diplomatic ties are eventually severed altogether, it could trigger a domino effect, encouraging other Arab and Muslim-majority countries with diplomatic ties to Israel to follow suit.

Moreover, Turkey will not relinquish its close ties with Hamas and will continue to allow the organization to operate on its territory with varying degrees of freedom. This is rooted in the ideological affinity between President Erdoğan's party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, of which Hamas is a part. Given the concerns among pragmatic Sunni states about the Muslim Brotherhood—mainly for domestic political reasons—Ankara's staunch support for Hamas is problematic. From Israel's perspective, especially after the events of October 7, Turkey's ongoing support for Hamas makes Jerusalem unwilling to see Turkey take a practical role in the "day after" scenario in Gaza. Thus, even if the idea of a multinational force to assist in postwar governance in Gaza is raised, Israel is unlikely to agree to Turkey's participation—despite the fact that, in the past, Israel allowed Turkey to take part in the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) following the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre. Turkey, for its part, is likely to view negatively any attempts to exclude it from Gaza's

reconstruction plans—initiatives that carry not only political influence but also economic potential, especially for Turkish construction firms.

Turkey was not included in the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative announced by President Joe Biden during the G20 summit in September 2023. That project, which implies normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, channels goods to Europe via Greece, bypassing Turkey. IMEC is also emblematic of the growing ties between Cyprus, Greece, and the Gulf states—relationships that Ankara perceives as coming at its expense. In response, Erdoğan declared that "without Turkey, there is no corridor." Turkey is actively promoting a rival project—the Iraq Development Road—which would transfer goods from the al-Faw port in Iraq's Basra province to Turkey and from there to Europe. Turkey has managed to enlist the UAE and Qatar to support this project. Given the US interest in promoting IMEC as a counterweight to Chinese influence under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this issue has broader implications beyond the Middle East.

Although Turkish vessels have also been affected by Houthi activity and the disruptions to Red Sea shipping, Turkey—like many Arab and Muslim countries—is not participating in the international coalition against Houthi aggression. Unlike the tacit support offered by some Arab states, Ankara explicitly accused the US and the UK of turning the Red Sea into a "bloodbath." Turkey's unwillingness to support—rhetorically or otherwise—the coalition fighting the Houthis suggests that domestic considerations weigh heavily on its foreign policy, particularly as Turkish public opinion views the Houthis as aiding the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

Nevertheless, some factors may moderate Turkey's opposition to Israeli–Saudi normalization. Since the early 2010s, Turkey has significantly improved its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and has an increasing need for investment from Gulf states to help it recover from its economic crisis. The growing strength of Turkey's defense industry has also drawn interest from Gulf countries and Egypt—especially in acquiring UAVs—thus warming

relations further. Therefore, while Turkey may initially object to normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, it is likely, as with the Abraham Accords, to ultimately come to terms with it.

In fact, despite Turkey's opposition to the Abraham Accords, Israel's strengthened regional position and its deepening cooperation with the UAE enabled it to enter the 2022 normalization process with Turkey from a position of strength, unlike in past instances. Amid the crisis in Israeli–Turkish relations, normalization with Saudi Arabia would further reduce Erdoğan's ability to harm Israel. Overland and air connections between Israel and the East via the Gulf states have also helped offset some effects of Turkey's boycott. For example, while Turkish Airlines halted flights to Israel and plans to resume them only later in 2025, Emirati carriers were among the first to resume service to Israel. Still, today's hostility between Israel and Turkey is significantly more severe than it was on the eve of their 2022 normalization, making it unclear whether that precedent can be applied to what may come following Saudi–Israeli normalization.

SAUDI-ISRAEL NORMALIZATION AND THE "AXIS OF RESISTANCE"

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The members of the "Axis of Resistance," led by Iran, perceive a potential normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia as a strategic threat and seek to thwart it. Iran and its proxies—chief among them Hezbollah—view normalization as a potential boost to the military and economic dominance of the Sunni-Western axis, which would hinder their ability to act against Israel. Hassan Nasrallah, former leader of Hezbollah, frequently voiced his opposition to normalization, often launching sharp criticism at Arab states that recognize Israel, accusing them of betraying the Palestinian cause.

Syria has undergone a tectonic shift following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime. While the previous regime opposed formal recognition of Israel, it avoided explicit condemnations of Arab states—including Saudi Arabia—in order not to jeopardize its efforts to renew ties with them. Although the future of Syria and the intentions of its new leadership remain uncertain, the interim government under Ahmad al-Sharaa is actively working to establish diplomatic relations and restore ties with various regional and Western countries. Its declared policy favors peace and not confrontation, suggesting it is unlikely to express opposition to possible normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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Iran and Hezbollah are pursuing diplomatic and strategic efforts aimed at weakening the incentive of Arab states to cooperate with Israel and the United States. However, from the perspective of the Axis of Resistance, this is not a zero-sum game: normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia is not necessarily incompatible with maintaining normal relations between Iran and the kingdom.

Iran—Normalization as a Strategic Threat to Its Security

The words of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in support of Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack—stating it occurred "precisely at a time when the region needed it," in view of the plan by the Americans, the Zionists, their supporters, and some regional countries to change the equation in the region—reflect the deep anxiety among leaders of the Tehran regime over the realization of Israeli–Saudi normalization. They also underscore the sense of relief that this process was significantly derailed following Hamas' attack on Israel.

From the Iranian leadership's point of view, normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia entails several highly negative implications for Iran's security. Foremost is the assessment that such an alignment would bolster Sunni-Western military superiority in the region. This was clearly demonstrated during Iran's attack on Israel (April 13–14, 2024), when Israeli-regional cooperation under the U.S. and CENTCOM umbrella intercepted a broad salvo of missiles and UAVs launched from Iran toward Israel. Moreover, the prospect of Israel gaining a physical foothold in yet another country near Iran is of great concern to Tehran, which seeks to push threats away from its borders. Normalization could also significantly enhance Saudi Arabia's economic capabilities, reduce Iran's ability to maintain and increase its regional economic and political encirclement of Israel, and limit its capacity to deepen ties with Sunni states that already have relations with Israel. Most importantly, normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia would confer full legitimacy on Israel and signify its

integration into the region. This may open the door for additional Muslim countries (e.g., Indonesia) to normalize ties with Israel, thereby dramatically narrowing the anti-Israel front in the region and beyond.

To prevent such developments, Iran has taken several measures. Following public threats—notably, statements that any state permitting anti-Iranian activity from its territory would be deemed a legitimate target—Tehran intensified diplomatic efforts, especially toward Gulf states, seeking to reduce their fear of Iran and their motivation to tighten bonds with Israel and the U.S. Still, Iran has had to accept normalization processes between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain.

Given that normalization with Saudi Arabia is perceived in Iran as Israel's "grand prize," Tehran may consider threatening renewed Houthi military activity against Riyadh, possibly violating their ceasefire agreement. Though this would not entail automatic compliance—the Houthis have their own considerations—Tehran's mounting concerns could push for discussions with them on this possibility.

Under such circumstances, promoting normalization with Saudi Arabia should be a central Israeli objective in its campaign against Iran. This would strengthen Israel's military deterrence, upgrade its defenses against future Iranian attacks, and deepen its economic and security foothold in the Gulf—to Tehran's dismay. Even if normalization occurs, Iran is expected to maintain diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, as it has with the UAE. However, it will likely seek to highlight the costs of normalization and prevent its spread to other regional states, particularly Oman and Qatar.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah's strategic position has fundamentally changed due to the war with Israel. Once a dominant force in Lebanon and a leading actor in the Shiite axis, it has become weakened and is currently focused on rebuilding its organization and support base. Nonetheless, the organization retains its core

ideology, including the legacy of former leader Hassan Nasrallah, which views normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia as a regional strategic threat. While Iran strengthens its diplomatic ties with Gulf states to preemptively counter normalization, Hezbollah sees the potential establishment of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as a danger signaling the formation of a pragmatic bloc of states—including Egypt, Jordan, and Gulf states—that seeks to contain or even confront the Iran-led axis.

Hezbollah remains ideologically opposed to normalization based on its fundamental stance that Israel is the root of all regional evil and problems, has no right to exist, and should be fought, not recognized. Nasrallah frequently condemned normalization efforts and Western portrayals of Israel as a democracy operating under law, accusing normalizing states of betraying the Palestinian cause. In his speeches after October 7, he argued that Arabs now understand the illusion of normalization, and that Israel's image as a helpful power has been shattered, revealing its dependence on U.S. support. In his May 13, 2024 speech, he mocked states normalizing ties with Israel, claiming the war had stopped several from signing "death documents" with Israel.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, Nasrallah historically viewed the kingdom as a central enemy. He accused it of fostering ISIS—the eternal enemy of Shiite Islam—and of being behind conspiracies against Lebanon and Hezbollah, acting on behalf of the U.S. and Israel. He preferred that Saudi Arabia not resume aid to Lebanon, fearing renewed influence over the country's internal operation. He claimed that such alliances destabilize the region and that behind-the-scenes contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia prove Riyadh's alignment with the Western, U.S.-backed bloc seeking to confront the Iran-led resistance axis. For Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis—allies in the Shiite resistance axis—is further reason to consider it a primary foe. While no change is expected in Hezbollah's position toward Saudi Arabia and Gulf states normalizing with Israel, the organization, in its weakened

state, is unlikely to act against them, though it will continue supporting Iran's opposition to regional normalization efforts.

Syria

Under Bashar al-Assad, Syria was a central partner in the axis of resistance and officially opposed recognition of Israel. However, Assad seldom commented on the possibility of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia under the Saudi-American framework and largely refrained from strongly condemning the Abraham Accords.

Assad's reserved statements reflected his desire not to challenge the regional normalization process with Syria after a decade of estrangement from Arab states. Syria's return to the Arab fold gained momentum in late 2021, peaking with the renewal of ties with Saudi Arabia in March 2023. In June 2024, Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Damascus after 12 years. The surprise attack by the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which toppled the Assad regime, dramatically altered Syria's landscape. As of writing, no new government has fully stabilized. The interim government under HTS portrays a moderate image and claims that Syria's foreign policy should be based on reconciliation and diplomacy, not violent conflict.

In January 2025, a Syrian delegation led by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani visited Riyadh. A month later, Syria's new president al-Julani visited Riyadh and met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—his first visit to the Gulf. The goal was to launch a new, positive chapter in Syrian-Saudi relations. A prior Saudi delegation had also met interim leader Ahmad al-Shara in Damascus. HTS's Sunni Islamist identity facilitates ties with Saudi Arabia, which views the Shiite Iran-led axis as a greater threat. However, if Syria's new regime increasingly aligns with Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated actors like Turkey or the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, Saudi Arabia may proceed with greater caution.

HTS has maintained a conciliatory stance toward Israel, stating that Syria has no interest in conflict. If this moderate line continues, no opposition to Israeli-Saudi normalization is expected. In fact, HTS views Iran as an adversary and would benefit from any regional process weakening Tehran's position. Syria's dire economic and energy crisis means it may benefit from regional cooperation, particularly Saudi-Israeli collaboration on reconstruction. Saudi Arabia may influence Israel to adopt a more positive role toward Syria or at least reduce hostile actions to protect stabilization efforts.

An agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia would carry positive potential for the new regime. The American sanctions under the "Caesar Act" (secondary sanctions imposed on any party that cooperates with the Assad regime) prevent countries and entities from making economic investments in Syria. The law, which had been set to expire in December 2024, was renewed, with a slight easing of some sanctions to facilitate the transfer of economic aid for the reconstruction process. The new regime, with Saudi support as well, is working to have these sanctions removed. In this context, and from Israel's perspective, it is likely that Saudi Arabia would play a central role in channeling aid and investments into the country. This move could undermine efforts by actors it perceives as more hostile (Iran, Russia, and to some extent even Turkey) to deepen their involvement and influence in Syria under the guise of economic and humanitarian assistance.

The Houthis and their View of Normalization

No other Middle Eastern terrorist organization is likely more threatened by Israeli-Saudi normalization than the Houthis, who control most of Yemen's vital territory. Though they currently maintain a shaky ceasefire with Saudi Arabia, they likely perceive normalization as a direct threat. It would significantly strengthen Riyadh, increase Israel's regional presence, and deepen Saudi-U.S. military ties—particularly troubling given the U.S.-led campaign against the

Houthis due to their attacks on Israel and on maritime freedom in the Red Sea amid the Swords of Iron war.

Moreover, the Houthis could pose a military threat to Saudi Arabia in an attempt to deter it from normalizing relations with Israel. A hint of this was seen at the end of October 2023, when—apparently in retaliation for the interception of Houthi missiles on route to Israel—Houthi forces killed four soldiers on the border between the two countries. The fact that the Houthis were willing to take the risks associated with such an action may indicate future motivation. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the Houthis, with Iranian encouragement, will refuse to accept Israeli–Saudi normalization and will not hesitate to exact a price from Saudi Arabia for it.

The Houthis may threaten direct use of force against Saudi Arabia, which is highly apprehensive about returning to conflict with the Yemeni terrorist organization. De facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman prefers to focus on consolidating his power at home rather than reenter a Sisyphean confrontation with the Houthis, which damages his security image. In recent months alone, the Houthis have effectively extorted Riyadh to prevent any harm to Saudi Arabia's economic situation, so it is likely that they will not hesitate to threaten Saudi Arabia with renewed military confrontation if it dares to advance toward normalization with Israel. However, when it comes to resuming the use of force against Saudi Arabia, it seems that such a step is still a long way off, and the Houthi regime faces a genuine dilemma. It has a clear interest in preserving the ceasefire agreement with the Saudis, which has lasted nearly three years. Indeed, the Houthis have not attacked the Kingdom over the past year, despite their assaults on Israel and on shipping, and despite the fact that Riyadh intercepted missiles they had launched toward Israel.

In any case, the Houthis' religious and ideological hostility toward Israel—as demonstrated by their active participation in the Swords of Iron campaign—has proven that they are willing to resort to violence in order to harm Israel, even at a steep cost, especially when Israel acts against one of the other

members of the Axis. This fact, combined with the Houthis' fear of Saudi military strengthening, and their realization that they can pressure the Saudis into making significant concessions without using force—merely through threats—will inevitably lead them to intensify their public military threats toward the Kingdom should it move forward with normalization with Israel, even if such threats are not immediately acted upon. In practice, it is likely that the Houthis will signal to the Saudis the potential price they may pay (similar to the border incident in October) and will try to rally at least the Shiite militias in Iraq behind them—especially in light of the unprecedented rapprochement between them during the Swords of Iron war—in order to present a unified front of the Axis of Resistance against Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, given the Houthis' fundamental interest in maintaining the agreement with Saudi Arabia, it appears they will not immediately launch a wide-scale military campaign against the Kingdom. Instead, they are expected to gradually intensify escalatory steps designed to dissuade it from further rapprochement with Israel. The bottom line is that if there is one actor within the Axis—especially in light of Hezbollah's weakening—that may consider using violence to disrupt the normalization process, it is the Houthis.

MIDDLE EASTERN ANTI-NORMALIZATION GROUPS

EHUD ROSEN*

For more than two decades, the State of Israel has been subjected to a global delegitimization campaign aimed at undermining its right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This campaign operates across both the political and civil arenas, with one particularly prominent aspect being the coordinated activity of non-governmental organizations in liberal-democratic countries. These efforts are carried out within the framework of the "Red-Green Alliance," which entails extensive collaboration between activists and organizations from streams of political Islam (Islamists) and their counterparts on the left (primarily radical socialists with Marxist-Leninist backgrounds). At least some of these activists have ties to the Middle East, and are at times directly affiliated with organizations officially designated as terrorist groups in the West, such as Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The broad cooperation between such actors and radical Western elements—who aim to transform the current order and undermine the liberal-democratic system—has, over time, produced a romanticized image of violent action. This violence is portrayed as grassroots, nonviolent activism rather than as a deliberate and coordinated strategy by these ideological circles.

In recent years, entities active within the Red-Green Alliance have added another branch to their struggle: opposition to the initiatives that led to the signing of the Abraham Accords and the broader normalization process between Israel and several countries in the region. They have established frameworks for both Middle Eastern and international mobilization around anti-normalization activity. This article focuses on several prominent groups involved in these activities in countries that signed the Abraham Accords,

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and reviews the coordination among them as well as their operations both in the Middle East and beyond.

Background

For many decades, Islamism has been considered the most organized opposition force in Middle Eastern countries, led primarily by movements affiliated with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. These movements, recognized over the years as representatives of this ideology in their respective countries, operate civilian *da'wa* (proselytization and outreach) mechanisms through which they have built their support bases. Where possible, they also participate in the political sphere—formally or informally. While they act within their own countries according to local circumstances and opportunities, they also coordinate among themselves—and with similar ideological frameworks around the world—on strategies, directions for action, and grassroots activity. In some cases, they even share common sources of funding, both state and non-state. Over time, this has resulted in the formation of an international network of organizations and activists from the Middle East and beyond. At least during the first generation, this network consisted largely of Middle Eastern exiles who had been persecuted for years by the regimes in their home countries. These individuals were able to operate freely in Western countries under the protections and liberties granted to them. Moreover, following the rapid rise and fall of Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated regimes in the Middle East during the Arab Spring revolutions, the need to shift the center of gravity of Islamist activity to the West has become even more pressing. In early 2016, the first conference of its kind for Muslim councils in the West was held in Washington, under the sponsorship of the US Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO)—an Islamist-American umbrella group established two years earlier as part of a reorganization and rebranding process.

Today, the Muslim Brotherhood and its brand of Islamism can be accurately described as a transnational religious-political movement. The second- and

third-generation activists in Western countries have adapted their methods to Western realities and sensibilities. The civilian arms of these Brotherhood-affiliated networks operate within Western political systems and target centers of social and governmental power. Until recent years, they have largely succeeded in portraying themselves as "community leaders" and as a moderating force vis-à-vis the younger generations drawn to more radical elements.

The Palestinian issue—particularly the Islamist line and support for Hamas and its armed struggle against Israel—has long served as a key unifying anchor in the Islamist effort to reunite the Islamic nation. Additionally, support for Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and a prominent actor in the "Resistance Axis" (*muqawama*), has opened the door for fruitful cooperation between the two main camps within the Brotherhood movement: the "mainstream" camp, which sees itself as following the path of Hassan al-Banna, and the more radical one from which global jihadist circles have emerged. Many of the groups in the latter camp are rooted in the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, the revolutionary thinker active in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1950s, and of Abul A'la Maududi, the Indo-Pakistani ideologue who had a significant influence on Qutb and the Brotherhood more broadly. Despite other ideological disagreements, cooperation between the two camps remains possible.

One of the most common methods of coordination within and among the various camps is the convening of international conferences, where strategies of action are discussed and new initiatives and "civilian bodies" are presented. Another method is message coordination and direct action on the ground, such as demonstrations in various countries. In the West, these are often organized in collaboration with radical left-wing organizations. During the Swords of Iron war, such demonstrations became more widespread and influential than ever before.

Over the years, key Islamist figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas have increasingly emphasized the importance of nonviolent

resistance on the civilian front, alongside military resistance. In 2005, Khaled Mashal described resistance as a comprehensive state of being and a complete way of life, highlighting the significance of such a front. He spoke at the relaunch conference in Doha of the Global Anti-Aggression Campaign (GAAC)—a highly important umbrella framework established by hundreds of activist Sunni clerics. The organization was active primarily until 2016 and included senior figures from Muslim Brotherhood circles in both the Middle East and Western countries, senior Hamas leaders, and Salafi and Salafi-jihadist leaders—among them at least seven individuals designated as terrorists by Western countries and the United Nations due to their ties to al-Qaeda. Over the years, GAAC took part in various "civilian" initiatives in partnership with both radical leftist and Islamist actors. Notably, in early 2009—following the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza—it held a conference that included a series of workshops focused on civilian methods of struggle. These included cooperation with international actors on human rights issues, recourse to international legal tribunals, the organization of nonviolent demonstrations, and more.

The Struggle Against Normalization with Israel in the Context of the Abraham Accords

The discourse around normalization was central during the peace negotiations with Egypt—and even earlier. Shortly after Donald Trump entered the White House at the end of 2016, public discussions began regarding the possible relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The Islamist axis began preparing for a new wave of resistance around the issue, and several conferences were convened to coordinate opposition strategies to such initiatives. In November 2017, for example, a Gulf conference was held in Kuwait under the sponsorship of then-Speaker of the National Assembly, Marzouq Al-Ghanim. In early December 2017, Trump delivered a speech in which he declared that the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and that the American administration would begin preparations to

move the embassy to the city. Later that month, what was likely the most significant Islamist conference to date was held: the "Conference of the Nation's Religious Scholars Against Political Normalization with the Zionist Entity." The event took place in Istanbul and was attended by around 300 clerics from 25 organizations, whose names suggested representation of religious scholars from many Middle Eastern countries. A press conference launching a declaration on the issue was even held at the offices of the Islamist organization İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH)—a group with known ties to terrorist organizations, which gained international attention as a partner in organizing the 2010 "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" with Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated circles and Western radical left activists.

The declaration is published on the website of the Association of Palestinian Religious Scholars, which is explicitly aligned with a pro-Hamas stance. It portrays normalization as a threat to fundamental Islamic humanitarian values such as freedom, justice, dignity, international security, and peace, and as an attempt to dismantle the doctrine of liberating al-Aqsa while forcibly "Judaizing" generations of Muslims. Israel is described in the document as a racist Zionist entity hostile to humanity, which steals Palestinian land, desecrates holy sites, and violates the rights and freedoms of those living under its control—an illegitimate entity founded by force and terror, against which resistance, including armed resistance, is sanctioned by international norms and laws. The declaration asserts that opposition to normalization is a religious duty and a human responsibility for all members of Arab and Muslim societies. The identities of the participating organizations and the signatories of the declaration come as no surprise and follow established patterns of anti-Israel activity. One of the leading bodies was the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), then still led by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (d. 2022), who served as the spiritual authority for Muslim Brotherhood circles worldwide. Most of the other organizations are also identifiable with Islamist groups; some, though they claim to represent scholars from various

Middle Eastern countries, actually operate out of Turkey. They were joined by several Salafi and Salafi-jihadist organizations. GAAC, though less active by that point, was also listed among the participating entities. During the conference, participants called, among other things, for Muslim countries to impose a boycott on US-made goods.

Following the Abraham Accords, several Middle Eastern groups were established with a focus on resisting normalization. Below are details on some of the prominent groups:

Emirati Campaign Against Normalization and the "Emirati Association for Resisting Normalization"

After the signing of the peace agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates in August 2020, a campaign opposing the accords was launched. The campaign's founding statement was signed by 20 academics and businesspeople, some of whom are affiliated with the Emirati branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—Al-Islah. By late August, a related campaign had begun circulating on social media. It is worth noting that in early 2013, UAE authorities charged 94 individuals associated with Al-Islah with plotting terrorist activities and a coup, most of whom have since remained in detention. The UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014. In January 2024, Al-Islah members were again brought to trial in the UAE, and in August the authorities claimed to have uncovered an attempt to reestablish the movement using exiled members and with cooperation from figures in other countries also linked to Brotherhood circles. The UAE's handling of the issue over the years has been widely criticized by international human rights organizations. In response, a network of Islamist-aligned human rights groups was established, focusing on the matter and cooperating with similar organizations. The campaign was led by Alaa al-Siddiq, an Emirati activist based in London and the daughter of an Al-Islah member who died in a car crash in 2021. Al-Siddiq headed a human rights organization named ALQST,

founded by Saudi opposition figures in exile in the UK, which focuses its activity on criticizing Gulf regimes.

Six of the signatories of the campaign's founding statement also established a group called The Emirati Association for Resisting Normalization. According to its own description, the association is dedicated to "resisting all forms of normalization with the Zionist entity occupying the land of Palestine." Based on its Facebook account, it operates out of Istanbul. On social media, it publishes materials related to Gulf-Israel rapprochement, calls for boycotts against companies linked to Israel, and support for the broader BDS campaign. Since the beginning of the Swords of Iron war, the association has also posted messages in support of Gaza's "victory." The association is led by Ahmad al-Sheiba al-Naamani, one of eight Al-Islah members tried in absentia and sentenced to prison in the UAE, and whose name has been on the country's terrorism lists since 2021. Al-Naamani resides in the UK and is active in various Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated frameworks. He contributes to the movement's weekly publication *Risalat al-Ikhwan*, published in London. In a webinar hosted by the association in October 2020, several proposals were raised on how to oppose normalization, including actions in the fields of art and social media—capitalizing on "popular rejection" of normalization—expanding the base of opposition beyond Islamist circles, and uniting forces with other relevant movements.

The Bahraini Society Against Normalization with the Zionist Enemy

It appears that the most active group in Bahrain on this issue is the *Bahraini Society Against Normalization*, which was officially registered in the country back in 2002. Sixteen individuals are listed as the society's founders, headed by Sheikh Issa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, a former politician who was among the founders of the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In August 2024, the Muslim Brotherhood branch organized a memorial rally for Ismail Haniyeh

following his assassination by Israel, in collaboration with another organization. The rally was held in a hall commemorating Issa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa.

Other activists within the society come from a Marxist background, and the society played an active role in the recent campaign for the release of former opposition figure Ibrahim Sharif, who had been imprisoned several times in Bahrain. Sharif heads the *Wa'ad* Party, which grew out of the underground movement *Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain*, which he joined in the 1980s. He was released from detention in November 2023. According to a U.S. report, in 2008, Sharif led a delegation to Lebanon, where he praised the activities of terrorist Samir Kuntar, who had been released from Israeli prison at that time as part of a deal and joined Hezbollah.

On October 7, 2023, the society's X (formerly Twitter) account posted a video of Ibrahim Sharif praising the day's events. The society's social media accounts regularly post videos of protests it organizes and calls for boycotts of international companies with ties to Israel.

The Moroccan Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization

Marxist-Leninist groups and their mobilization for anti-Zionist activism are particularly visible in Morocco. These groups have gradually replaced the traditional socialist movements that had taken part in the Maghreb's anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s and 1960s. In March 2023, 100 legal and academic professionals signed a petition calling to halt normalization with Israel. Among the signatories were several figures who had held senior positions in parties from similar ideological backgrounds, including one who began his career in anti-colonial militias. In May, the *Moroccan Front for Supporting Palestine and Against Normalization* convened at the offices of the *Moroccan Association for Human Rights*—a veteran organization whose leadership also hails from a Marxist-Leninist background. This meeting was the front's third national assembly, attended by its member organizations under the slogan: "Together for the Palestinian resistance and against normalization."

Reports stated that the assembly included civil activists, politicians, party leaders, and cultural figures. Alongside the many participants with socialist backgrounds, representatives of the Islamist opposition party *Justice and Charity* also took part. Normalization was repeatedly described as an act of betrayal, and there was consensus that action must be taken to stop it.

In April 2023, the Front sent a public letter of support for Palestinian prisoners and those on hunger strike, in honor of Palestinian Prisoners Day. In May 2023, a demonstration was held marking 75 years since the Nakba. Among the demonstrators was long-time Marxist-leftist and anti-Zionist Jew, Sion Assidon, a member of the Front's leadership. Assidon was one of the founders of the *March 23* Marxist-Leninist organization in the 1970s, and is among a group of Jewish activists on the fringes of the left who have been involved in Moroccan politics. He also participated in a protest in front of the Moroccan parliament in July 2022 during the visit of then-IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi. During the Swords of Iron war, the Front organized anti-Israel demonstrations and called to fight the "cancer of normalization" and to support the "heroic Palestinian resistance." The Front is also actively campaigning for the release of Ismail Al-Gazaoui, who was arrested and imprisoned for one year toward the end of 2024 and is identified as a member of the Moroccan branch of the BDS movement.

The Moroccan Observatory Against Normalization

An older organization in the country is the *Moroccan Observatory Against Normalization*, led by left-wing activist Ahmed Wihmane, who was arrested and prosecuted in Morocco in 2019 due to his anti-Israel activities. Wihmane has been praised by circles close to the Muslim Brotherhood. Ahmed Raissouni, a Moroccan Islamist who succeeded Qaradawi as head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, dedicated an article on his personal website to Wihmane, describing him as a national and international symbol of the struggle against normalization and against the "Zionist occupier."

The Observatory collaborates with other organizations such as the *National Action Group for Supporting Palestine/Morocco*. For example, in September 2021, the Action Group submitted a letter to the UN protesting "Israel's crimes" against Palestinian prisoners, the al-Aqsa Mosque, and Jerusalem, and the organization's silence on the matter. The delegation delivering the letter included, in addition to Wihmane, the head of the largest Islamist movement in Parliament—*Unity and Reform*. In February 2023, the two bodies also collaborated with the aforementioned Moroccan Front in organizing an anti-Israel demonstration.

In July 2023, the Observatory warned that the Israeli government's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and the announcement that a consulate may be established in the region, stem from a desire to take control over the Sahara and over Morocco as a whole. In January 2024, the Observatory initiated a petition calling for the closure of Israel's diplomatic mission in the country and the cessation of the normalization process.

Establishment and Activity of a Coordinating Body Against Normalization

As in other areas where the campaign to delegitimize Israel is active, a coordinating body was also established in early 2021 for the struggle against normalization. Operating out of Istanbul, it is called the High Coordination Committee for Anti-Zionism and Resistance to Normalization, more commonly known as the Anti-Zionism Coordination (AZC). The committee is chaired by Moroccan left-wing activist Ahmed Wihmane, and his deputy is Ahmed Al-Sheiba Al-Naamani, an Al-Islah (Muslim Brotherhood) activist exiled from the United Arab Emirates.

In February 2022, the AZC made headlines in the United Kingdom when Jeremy Corbyn—the former leader of the British Labour Party, who was expelled from the party and now serves as an independent MP affiliated with the pro-Palestinian bloc—was forced to cancel his participation in a webinar organized by the AZC. The event was titled: *"The Year of Struggle Against Normalization:*

We Will Resist the [Zionist] Entity and Defend Our Homelands." Corbyn canceled after it was revealed that among the event's sponsors were: a body designated as a terrorist organization in the United States due to its ties to Hamas; another headed by senior Hamas official Bassem Naim, responsible among other things for BDS within the movement (and who, in late 2024, was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department along with other senior Hamas members); and a third organization headed by a senior figure in Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

The committee's website publishes various materials related to the boycott campaign against Israel, public statements, and religious rulings opposing normalization—some of which are issued by bodies affiliated with Hamas. It should be noted that its social media accounts are currently less active than in the past.

Conclusion

With the launch of initiatives to promote normalization between Israel and Arab states, the efforts to resist it have escalated. As in other areas of the campaign to delegitimize Israel's right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people, this sphere has also seen mobilization by local "civil" or "non-governmental" organizations that present themselves as grassroots, non-violent actors. In reality, many of these organizations are linked to broader Islamist networks that often include exiled activists. At times, they are directly connected to Hamas and other designated terrorist organizations on one hand, and to Marxist-Leninist backgrounds on the other. Most often, these networks also represent opposition movements to the ruling governments.

The Swords of Iron war significantly escalated such activities against Israel at the international level—including protests in the streets and on campuses across Western countries, as well as efforts targeting international political and legal systems. In order to continue advancing the Abraham Accords, there is an urgent need to understand this activity, its background, and the critical importance of developing effective counter-strategies.

PART III

THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

EUROPE'S RESPONSE TO NORMALIZATION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL

RÉMI DANIEL*

Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel would place European leaders in a dilemma between principles and interests—between the traditional desire to make the two-state solution a cornerstone of any political process involving Israel and the understanding that Israeli–Saudi normalization serves Europe's real strategic interests.

A similar situation arose during the signing of the Abraham Accords (2020), which caused some discomfort for European states due to concerns that the agreements would harm the chances of an Israeli–Palestinian settlement. However, Europe's room for maneuver was then very limited in the face of a dramatic development backed by the United States—Europe's vital ally. The timing of those agreements, just months before the U.S. presidential elections and amid uncertainty regarding the stance of the incoming administration, led the Europeans to adopt a wait-and-see approach toward political stabilization in Washington. Once it became clear that President Biden would also advance the Abraham Accords, European leaders began speaking of them more positively, emphasizing the constructive role they could play in the Palestinian context. As early as the beginning of 2021, the European Union incorporated the "normalization of relations between Israel and a number of Arab states" (without explicitly using the term "Abraham Accords") into its policy toward its southern neighbors, with the goal of advancing these relations and linking them to a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. About two years after the agreements were signed, in December 2022, the EU began allocating

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(modest) funds to strengthen ties between Israel and Arab states, leading to joint events in early 2023.

As with any issue of foreign policy, in addition to a European-level stance, the truly significant responses will be at the national level—where there are differences of opinion among European governments, especially regarding Middle East affairs. Despite determined efforts to promote a unified European foreign policy, decisions on such matters within the EU must be made unanimously. Therefore, if full agreement among member states is lacking, any attempt to present a clear official policy is blocked. Moreover, major European countries have opted to conduct relatively independent foreign policies in the Middle East and the Gulf, generating competition among them. As a result, any assessment of a European response to a move such as Israeli–Saudi normalization must take into account the particular policies of leading European states and the potentially paralyzing effect of disagreements among their leaders. It is entirely possible that even if a "middle-of-the-road" European position emerges, one country—or a group of countries—on the continent may adopt a different stance.

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, a number of developments and processes have occurred that are likely to shape Europe's response to Saudi–Israeli normalization, making it somewhat different from the reaction that followed the original accords. At the geopolitical level, a realist, interest-based approach has gained traction in Europe at the expense of the liberal paradigm of international relations grounded in normative values. This shift stems from changes both within Europe and globally. Internally, the rise of right-wing parties—including their most extreme variants—in many European countries and within the European Union has empowered politicians who are less sensitive to human rights issues, particularly those concerning Arabs or Muslims. These leaders often express support for Israel and are willing to engage with strongman figures. In addition, the war in Ukraine has altered the political worldview of many Europeans, reinforcing awareness that the

global arena has returned to one of competition and power dynamics. This has led to a noticeable change in European policy toward the Middle East, especially regarding Iran. The rise of the Iran–Russia axis has increased tensions between Tehran and European countries, sharpening their desire to find new partners—particularly in the Gulf—to counterbalance Iranian influence.

Economically, the fallout from the war in Ukraine—especially Europe's decision to reduce imports from Russia—has elevated the importance of the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia in particular, as an energy supplier for Europe. In 2022, oil imports from GCC countries amounted to $66 billion, compared to $25 billion in 2021. The European Union published a cooperation framework with the GCC, in which energy was a central pillar. Several European states also signed bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia. While the Gulf countries initially served as an emergency energy alternative for Europe following the war's outbreak, both sides are now planning long-term collaboration, including joint projects in green and blue energy.

Furthermore, the Ukraine war and the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry have heightened the strategic significance and sensitivity of trade routes between Asia and Europe. In this context, Europeans supported President Biden's IMEC (India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor) initiative. In September 2023, the European Union and three of its members—Germany, France, and Italy—signed a memorandum of understanding as a first step in establishing a trade route linking India to Europe via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel.

Israel has been one of the beneficiaries of Europe's shifting strategic outlook. The EU's gradual endorsement of the Abraham Accords can be understood in this light. However, the main regional beneficiary has been the Saudi regime, which has successfully rehabilitated its image in the Western world, including in Europe. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has visited several European capitals and is no longer seen as a pariah by European governments. Consequently, some of the sanctions imposed on him after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi have been lifted, despite segments of public

opinion remaining critical of Saudi Arabia's human rights record and its military involvement in Yemen.

The war in Gaza throughout 2024 has eroded support for Israel across Europe. Most European leaders seek an end to the conflict, both because of public sensitivity—particularly among vocal segments of the population—to the plight of the Palestinians, and because the war damages Europe's global image, especially in the Global South. At the same time, the war has also bolstered the far right in Europe and strengthened several pro-Israel politicians. Consequently, the European political landscape is deeply divided on the Israel–Palestine issue. The political center has shifted from unequivocal support for Israel's right to self-defense to a more critical view of IDF operations in Gaza, with the overwhelming majority of Europeans primarily desiring an end to the war.

While war in the Middle East has strained relations between Israel and Europe, it has significantly improved relations between Europe and Saudi Arabia—both in terms of confronting Iran and regarding the Gaza context. The actions of the pro-Iranian axis' in the region have been seen as harming European interests. Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping have disrupted Asia–Europe trade during a time when the Russian route is already closed, directly impacting European economies. These developments have intensified European hostility toward Iran. The deployment of naval forces in the Red Sea, European participation in operations against the Houthis, and involvement in efforts to intercept the Iranian missile attack on Israel in April 2024—often in coordination with Saudi Arabia—reflect Europe's growing willingness to counter the Iranian axis. This, in turn, strengthens Saudi Arabia's status and Europe's desire to cooperate with it. Since October 7, Europeans have also become more aware of the constructive role Riyadh could play in bringing the war to an end—whether as a source of legitimacy for a peace process, a financial supporter of Gaza's future reconstruction efforts, or even a contributor to a multinational stabilization force in the Strip.

The last major factor expected to shape Europe's response to normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is the outcome of the U.S. presidential election. While in 2020 Europe could maintain some distance from Donald Trump—then a lame-duck president with no congressional majority—it will be far more difficult to oppose a normalization initiative now that Trump has secured a decisive victory, holds a majority in both houses of Congress, and has expressed willingness to apply heavy pressure on global actors that oppose him. Indeed, European leaders responded differently to the 2024 election results. They conveyed a willingness to cooperate with the new American president and sought to avoid open confrontation with him.

Based on these developments, several characteristics can be expected in Europe's response to a potential normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Symbolically, such a development would underscore the European Union's marginality in shaping major regional political initiatives. Europe would once again find itself sidelined in a diplomatic process it did not help design, highlighting the political weakness of its leadership. Nevertheless, it is likely that European states will not oppose the normalization itself—even if they face pockets of negative public reaction. First, European states will find it difficult to challenge a joint American–Saudi initiative at a time when their diplomatic bandwidth is even more constrained than in 2020. The normalization would be backed by a resurgent U.S. superpower under a dominant president and by a key regional power—Saudi Arabia—that has become an increasingly vital partner for Europe. Within the EU, divergent national perspectives, especially among pro-Israel member states, would prevent the formulation of any coherent counter-policy. The European Parliament, especially after the 2024 elections that strengthened right-wing factions, is also unlikely to object. Second, Israeli–Saudi normalization may serve Europe's strategic interests—whether economic or in countering Iran—which have gained greater weight in European decision-making.

Still, Europe and its member states should not be dismissed as irrelevant. The European response to the Abraham Accords showed that the EU is capable of deepening ties between Israel and its neighbors through joint initiatives and funding. Given Europe's strong existing ties with both the Gulf and Israel, the EU can play a constructive bridging role between Jerusalem and Riyadh—helping to shape the content and strengthen the durability of normalization. Security considerations will be a central aspect of Saudi negotiations with the United States and Israel. In this domain, European states can contribute, more so at the national level than through the EU. Several European countries already supply arms to the Saudi military, and European forces operate in or around the Gulf in coordination with regional states. Thus, Europe is capable of offering some—albeit limited—security guarantees that Riyadh is expected to demand.

A key determinant of Europe's position will be the situation in the Palestinian arena and how the Palestinian issue is incorporated into the process between Riyadh, Washington, and Jerusalem. If the process advances solely between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia—without a direct Israeli component—European sensitivity will likely be lower, and the reaction more limited but positive. If Israel is part of the process, however, most Europeans—just as they did in response to the Abraham Accords—will emphasize the importance of linking Israeli integration in the region to a political resolution with the Palestinians. If normalization is framed as a way to resolve the Gaza conflict or even as a step toward a future Palestinian state, then European support is likely to grow quickly, along with a strong desire to participate in and influence the process.

In summary, European countries are unlikely to act as spoilers to a normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia or to a Saudi–U.S. agreement. The EU's diplomatic marginalization—driven by its internal weaknesses, its focus on Ukraine, and growing competition among its member states—has left it more interest-driven than values-based in its foreign policy decision-making. Israel should therefore not fear a negative European response.

In fact, engaging Europe could strengthen and deepen the agreement. That said, for Europe to be fully and swiftly integrated into the process, even a symbolic reference to the Palestinian issue will be essential.

NORMALIZATION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SAUDI ARABIA—THE RUSSIAN POSITION

GEORGY POROSKOUN, BAT CHEN DRUYAN FELDMAN, AND ARKADY MIL-MAN*

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.

CHINA AND NORMALIZATION

GALIA LAVI*

In recent years, China has expanded its involvement in the Middle East. While it may appear that Beijing provides unconditional support for Iran, the Gulf states are far more important to China, and its relations with them overshadow its ties with Tehran. China has deepened its connections with the Gulf states in traditional economic areas—such as oil and infrastructure—as well as in advanced technological sectors, including artificial intelligence and space. For context, total Chinese company investments in Iran between 2018 and 2022 amounted to less than $1 billion per year, while in 2022 alone, Chinese investments in Saudi Arabia totaled $3 billion, and $12 billion in the United Arab Emirates. Chinese exports to these countries also reflect the importance Beijing places on its relations with them. In 2023, exports from China to Iran stood at approximately $10 billion—significantly lower than the 2014 peak of $25 billion, and especially modest in comparison to exports of $43 billion to Saudi Arabia and $55 billion to the UAE. In addition to its strengthening economic ties with Middle Eastern states—particularly those in the Gulf—China has recently begun experimenting with positioning itself as a "mediator" in regional conflicts. A key example of this was its involvement in the final stage of restoring diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. Within this framework, China has hosted a number of dialogue forums between rival parties—for example, a failed 2017 attempt to broker a ceasefire with the Houthis in Yemen, and reconciliation talks between Palestinian factions in July 2024. Since 2021, China has also initiated several rounds of "peace talks" between unofficial Israeli and Palestinian representatives.

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It is important to emphasize that despite China's growing bilateral ties in the region, its Middle East policy is largely shaped through the lens of Beijing–Washington relations. China seeks to position itself as an alternative to what it views as American hegemony—one that foments conflict and undermines peace and stability in the Middle East. China's strategy includes outreach to the Global South, where it sees itself as a leading voice, and it brands itself as a proponent of reconciliation, peace, and dialogue. This model, which purports to avoid interfering in domestic affairs or criticizing states on issues such as human rights, is positively received by Gulf leaders. Through this approach, China aims to bolster its influence at the United States' expense—although it does not seek to replace the U.S. as the region's "policeman."

The 2020 Abraham Accords took Beijing by surprise, and its response at the time was vague and noncommittal. On the one hand, the accords represented an American diplomatic victory, reinforcing U.S. influence in the region and complicating China's activity there. On the other hand, the agreements promoted regional stability—vital to the economic activity from which China benefits. As a result, Beijing refrained from issuing explicit endorsements of the accords. Instead, Chinese officials offered general support for any initiative aimed at easing regional tensions. This raises the question of how China would respond to an Israeli–Saudi normalization process.

As of this writing, China has not issued any official statement on the matter. However, Chinese analysts widely believe that China would support such a process—even if not publicly. It is estimated that Beijing may choose to abstain in any related UN vote, thereby tacitly approving the normalization. It is also important to recall China's Global Security Initiative (GSI)—which, like many Chinese strategic initiatives, is vaguely worded to allow for flexible interpretation over time. Chinese mediation efforts, such as the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have since been incorporated into this initiative. In some respects, GSI may be viewed by Beijing as an alternative or competitor to U.S.-led peace efforts in the Middle East.

An Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement would ostensibly align with China's declared principles: promoting peace through dialogue and serving its interest in regional stability. Theoretically, such an agreement would allow China to deepen ties with both Riyadh and Jerusalem and enhance regional stability—benefiting its Middle Eastern economic interests. However, Beijing is acutely aware that growing U.S. influence over both countries would limit its ability to shape their policies, at least in certain areas. Recently, the U.S. has managed to curb some Chinese economic cooperation in the Middle East. For instance, in the past year, Emirati firm G42 was forced to sever ties with Chinese companies in order to cooperate with Microsoft. Similarly, Riyadh expressed willingness to scale back ties with China as part of a defense deal with the United States—linked in Washington's eyes to normalization with Israel. Furthermore, Israel–China relations are at a low point, particularly due to Beijing's rhetorical support for Hamas, Iran, and the Houthis during the Gaza war. Thus, in practice, an Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement would likely further distance both countries from China and draw them closer to the United States. To compensate, China may need to strengthen ties with other Gulf states—or even with Iran, though Beijing is likely reluctant to do so.

Therefore, while the economic benefits of normalization may serve China's interests, a U.S.-led agreement would be seen by Chinese leadership and the public as a victory for their main geopolitical rival. In such a case, Beijing would likely advance a counter-narrative framing itself as a relevant and responsible actor—as it did following the Iran–Saudi deal it hosted. This narrative could focus on the argument that the normalization includes some form of resolution to the Palestinian issue—a topic on which China has been outspoken in light of the Gaza war. Beijing could then portray its position as one that supports the resolution of the region's core conflict and advocates for justice and peace. While Israel has no interest in involving China in future negotiations with the Palestinians, it may be possible to enlist Chinese support for normalization through two avenues. First, if Beijing is promised post-

normalization economic benefits—especially through collaborations with Saudi Arabia and potentially Israel—this could help offset the distancing effect and maintain Chinese engagement. Second, in coordination with the United States, China could be encouraged to participate in infrastructure development for the Palestinian economy in the "day after" scenario in Gaza. This involvement could be linked to other Chinese global initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the Global Development Initiative.

In contrast, a U.S.–Saudi agreement that excludes Israeli normalization would likely face Chinese opposition. First, excluding the Palestinian issue from such a deal would be viewed as inconsistent with China's declared commitment to addressing what it considers the core problem in the region. Second, such a deal would represent a deepening of U.S.–Saudi ties at the expense of Saudi–Chinese relations—particularly in the sensitive field of nuclear energy. China routinely criticizes the formation of security blocs as "Cold War thinking," and it is likely to characterize a bilateral American–Saudi deal in similar terms. While China is unlikely to actively disrupt such rapprochement, it may quietly support Iranian efforts to do so. Beijing is also expected to issue strong statements at the UN and beyond, opposing a framework that neglects what it sees as the region's central unresolved issue: the Palestinian question.

The very fact that Israeli–Saudi normalization remains on the agenda, indicates that the fundamental motivations of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to advance this goal have not fundamentally changed, even after the momentum toward completing the process was halted by Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war. The three main states involved in the process are still striving—each for their own reasons—to bring the negotiations to fruition, with the overarching goal being the shaping of a new regional architecture in the Middle East.

This volume brings together articles written by researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies, which examine the positions and interests of various states and non-state actors in the Middle East and beyond, regarding Israeli–Saudi normalization. It explores how these stakeholders might influence the process and its chances of success—either positively or negatively, directly or indirectly.

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