

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

* Dr. Ofir Winter—Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies

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.