

EUROPE'S RESPONSE TO NORMALIZATION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL

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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.