

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.