

ISRAEL AND NORMALIZATION WITH SAUDI ARABIA

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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.