

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

* Dr. Yoel Guzansky – Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)

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.