

The Washington–Riyadh Axis: The Alliance Shaping the Middle East and the Challenge for Israel

Eldad Shavit and Yoel Guzansky | No. 2064 | November 27, 2025

The visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Washington—with the designation of Saudi Arabia as a “major non-NATO ally” at its center—reflected a US effort to lock Riyadh more firmly into the American camp in an era of great-power competition. For the United States, this means deepening the security framework with Saudi Arabia, ensuring major investments and access to advanced technologies, and integrating the move into a regional architecture built around the Abraham Accords and gradual normalization with Israel. This track would also include a pathway to resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. For Saudi Arabia, the visit leveraged its regional weight in exchange for security guarantees, access to advanced weapons and technologies, and progress toward a civilian nuclear project—while preserving room to maneuver vis-à-vis China and Russia.

From Israel’s perspective, the development represents the anchoring of long-term American involvement in the region and could enable a breakthrough with Saudi Arabia. At the same time, it poses risks to Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME), sets a regional precedent for civilian nuclear capability in the Gulf, and allows the shaping of US–Saudi arrangements that could bypass Israel. Jerusalem must deepen its dialogue with Washington (and Riyadh), define red lines alongside a flexible policy space, and influence the Palestinian component of any process toward normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The visit of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to Washington marked a new phase in US–Saudi relations. Reported understandings include a significant upgrade in security cooperation between the two countries; the president’s preliminary approval for the sale of F-35 aircraft to Saudi Arabia; Saudi investments in the United States that may reach one trillion dollars; and advanced, although not yet finalized, discussions on a civilian nuclear project. Both countries sought to achieve strategic objectives during the visit, the realization of which will directly shape the Middle East in the coming years.

From the Trump Administration’s Perspective

Anchoring Saudi Arabia in the American Camp Amid Great-Power Competition

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has advanced economic and energy relations with China and Russia, from oil agreements within the OPEC+ framework to cooperation in technology and infrastructure. From Washington’s perspective, efforts to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia is a strategic ally are intended to reduce the risk of Riyadh “tilting eastward” and to ensure its strategic orientation remains aligned with the United States.

Strengthening the Economic-Technological Partnership

During the meeting, extensive Saudi investments in the United States were promised, including in artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure. The Trump administration is eager to help Saudi Arabia realize its ambition of establishing the kingdom as the region's "innovation hub" (as part of the Saudi Vision 2030) and to anchor that ambition through massive Saudi investments in US infrastructure, energy, high-tech, and advanced industries. At the same time, Washington expects Saudi Arabia to align with certain US regulations concerning sensitive technologies, particularly in its dealings vis-à-vis China.

Advancing the Trump Administration's Vision for a New Regional Architecture

The administration views the ceasefire in Gaza and the release of the living hostages held by Hamas as the first step in a plan to expand the Abraham Accords, integrate Saudi Arabia into a security-economic framework alongside Israel, and shift a significant portion of the burden of regional stability to the regional partners themselves. Against this backdrop, the president and the crown prince discussed advancing normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. President Trump emphasized normalization as a lever for a new regional architecture based on economic and security cooperation. Bin Salman presented Saudi Arabia's preliminary demands for advancing this objective, notably American security guarantees, a package of advanced weapons, and Israeli agreement to an "irreversible" outline for establishing a Palestinian state.

From Saudi Arabia's Perspective

Rehabilitating Saudi Arabia's Image

For Mohammed bin Salman, the visit marked an important turning point in rehabilitating the kingdom's image in the United States in particular and in the West in general. In his view, the visit's outcomes attest to Saudi Arabia's role as a central player in both the regional and international systems. Full ceremonies at the White House—including a formal state dinner normally reserved for heads of state—extended meetings, and President Trump's public recognition of Crown Prince bin Salman as the legitimate and undisputed leader of the kingdom all reflected a significant shift from the recent past, particularly during the Biden administration when the crown prince's public image in the United States was a major barrier to improving relations.

Securing the US Commitment to Sell Advanced Weapons

If the US commitment is fulfilled, the sale of advanced weapons—including the F-35 aircraft, one of the most advanced in the US Air Force—would represent a historic development, as Saudi Arabia would be the first Arab state to receive the aircraft. The United Arab Emirates, it should be recalled, received a similar promise when joining the Abraham Accords, which ultimately did not materialize. Even if Congress delays the deal, the very announcement signals that Washington views Riyadh as a central security partner and that the balance of power in the Gulf and the Middle East is shifting in its favor.

Another achievement for Riyadh is the removal of American restrictions on exporting advanced chips to Saudi Arabia, which seeks to position itself as a global technological center, including for advanced AI systems, for use in ambitious projects such as the "Neom" city. The fact that Washington approved this despite the strong presence of Chinese companies in the kingdom reflects exceptional American confidence in the Saudis, although the move may have

come with conditions, such as increased oversight and/or limitations on Chinese activity in the kingdom.

In addition, Washington granted Saudi Arabia the status of a “major non-NATO ally.” Although largely symbolic—and already held by Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar—it provides advantages in military procurement and signals to the world that Riyadh is being reinstated as a senior partner in the American security architecture.

Alongside these achievements, the two most central objectives for Saudi Arabia were not achieved:

A Binding, Formal Defense Agreement

Riyadh has not yet secured American consent for such a formal defense agreement, intended to serve as a defense framework in exchange for a Saudi commitment to political and regional coordination. For two years, the Saudis have sought a framework that would include an explicit US commitment to defend the kingdom in the event of an attack. (Washington granted Qatar a similar document—a presidential order—following the Israeli strike in Doha but has not extended this formula to Riyadh.)

An Agreement to Enrich Uranium in Saudi Arabia

The second objective still beyond Saudi reach is a “123 Agreement” that would allow the establishment of civilian nuclear infrastructure under American supervision. Despite progress in bilateral discussions on this issue over the years, Congress refuses to approve an agreement that would allow local enrichment in Saudi Arabia, and bin Salman appears unwilling to abandon the control of all components in the nuclear fuel cycle. Washington may be holding both the defense agreement and nuclear cooperation as leverage for future normalization with Israel without requiring major Saudi political concessions. If so, this would be beneficial to Israel.

As for relations with Israel, Riyadh may ultimately agree to normalization but insists that it will not do so without meaningful steps toward an Israeli–Palestinian arrangement. From Washington’s perspective, Israel’s lack of progress allows it to preserve the strongest bargaining chips—defense and nuclear cooperation—for the moment when a genuine normalization deal becomes possible.

From Israel’s Perspective

For Israel, the crown prince’s visit to Washington is a complex event, symbolizing both a historic opportunity and significant risks. The strategic dialogue between the United States and Saudi Arabia is not only about weapons and normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem, but it also reflects Saudi Arabia’s new role as a leading strategic ally within the American axis in the Middle East. Israel will therefore need to redefine its role as an active partner within this regional architecture that the administration is determined to advance.

Opportunities

Anchoring the US Presence and a New Regional Architecture

From Israel’s perspective, one potentially positive outcome is the anchoring of a long-term US presence in the Middle East. A security agreement with Saudi Arabia, integrated within a

broader network of pro-American states (Egypt, Jordan, the UAE), would create a more favorable strategic environment for Israel—at least formally—while enabling closer security, economic, and technological cooperation.

Realizing Normalization With Saudi Arabia

Even if the early steps are limited and conditional, normalization with Saudi Arabia would be an immense achievement for Israel's standing and integration into the Arab and Muslim worlds, completing the process that began with the Abraham Accords. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia will need to convince its public and the region of tangible progress on the Palestinian issue—improved conditions in the Gaza Strip and a renewed commitment to a political process.

Risks

The Security Components of the Deal

Advanced weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, a greater partnership in regional defense, and possibly even future civilian nuclear cooperation raise concerns in Israel. The primary risks are the potential erosion of Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), the future easing of restrictions on transferring advanced weaponry to Riyadh, and the creation of a model that would encourage other Gulf states to demand similar nuclear projects. The very fact that the United States has agreed to discuss a civilian nuclear program in Saudi Arabia may indeed set a troubling regional precedent, but an attempt to block the project outright could push Riyadh to pursue alternative routes.

Israel cannot prevent the United States from building a strong security relationship with Saudi Arabia, but it can influence the details of such arrangements. If Israel tries to block the sale of advanced weapons altogether and succeeds, Saudi Arabia could turn to China, France, or Britain, leaving Israel with a worse outcome and without American oversight mechanisms. Israeli pressure on Congress to block arms sales to Saudi Arabia is also likely to be criticized by the Trump administration.

Israel's Marginalization—or Its Integration Into the Process

A problematic scenario for Israel is one in which the core agreements are shaped between Washington and Riyadh, with clear priority given to Saudi and American interests, and only later—if at all—are the implications for Israel considered. In this scenario, Israel may find itself facing a *fait accompli* regarding security, nuclear, and economic arrangements and may be required to adjust retroactively.

A more favorable scenario is one in which Jerusalem actively participates in discussions on defense architectures, coordinates steps with Washington and Riyadh vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies, and jointly promotes economic projects with Saudi Arabia that support the Saudi Vision 2030 and benefit Israel's economy.

Policy Recommendations

Israel Should Act as a Partner, not as a Spectator

The changing reality in the Middle East is not fully under Israel's control, but Israel can influence it. Israel should expand its direct dialogue with Washington and Riyadh, not only through official channels, but also via informal coordination mechanisms and business networks, to position itself as a natural partner in the new architecture and not as an actor reacting after the fact to a US–Saudi arrangement.

Israel Should Define Its “Red Lines” and Its Degree of Flexibility

Israel must clarify to itself and to the United States its non-negotiable points: the types of advanced weapons that must not be sold to Saudi Arabia without significant security compensation; the minimum rules that must govern the use of civilian nuclear capabilities to prevent dual-use risks; the US commitments that are required to ensure that the capabilities transferred to Saudi Arabia will not directly threaten Israel's security—including the systems provided, oversight mechanisms for any civilian nuclear activity, and Israel's integration into aerial and regional defense architectures that reduce risks. Precisely because Israel has become increasingly dependent on the American security umbrella, it must define red lines clearly to avoid drifting into the status of a quasi-protectorate with no choice but to approve decisions made without it.

Israel Should Be Prepared to Define the Price It Will Pay In the Palestinian Context

Any proposed normalization plan between Israel and Saudi Arabia will almost certainly include some Palestinian component. In principle, Israel can choose to automatically oppose, which would cast it as the “spoiler,” or attempt to initiate and shape the terms so that they are more reasonable from its perspective. Israel's choice then may be between a reasonable, phased price that it determines or a price dictated from the outside as a precondition for normalization.

Israel Should View US–Saudi Rapprochement as Part of a Broader Strategic Struggle

The crown prince's visit to Washington is not merely a “Saudi event”; rather, it is part of the Trump administration's wider efforts to reshape the Middle East at a time when the United States is also preoccupied with other arenas, such as competition with China, the Russia–Ukraine war, migration challenges, and issues linked to advanced technologies. For Israel, the question should not be limited to the visit's outcomes but rather to whether Israel can adapt to the new pattern of US regional policy, particularly given Washington's expectation that its allies assume a larger share of the security burden. Israel must therefore adopt a posture of “proactive partnership.” Otherwise, it risks finding itself in a strategic environment shaped without it, yet still requiring adjustments to its security policy.

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