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CHAPTER 11

The Rocky Road of Israeli-Saudi Normalization

Paul Aarts

Abstract Saudi Arabia has long maintained informal ties with Israel in various domains while also pushing for a negotiated solution to the Palestinian issue. As the latter has fallen on deaf ears of various Israeli governments, Riyadh has basically accepted Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories in the sense of not resisting it. After the Abraham Accords of 2020, Mohammed bin Salman started to negotiate a normalization agreement with Israel via the U.S. that intends to deliver a range of American-sponsored security benefits to the Kingdom in exchange for full diplomatic relations. The destruction of Gaza halted the completion of this process. However, this is not because Mohammed bin Salman or the Saudi ruling elites care greatly about the Palestinian cause, but because doing so would be domestically unpopular and risk Saudi Arabia's standing in the Arab as well as Islamic worlds. As Riyadh has at best mounted an ineffective form of 'conference diplomacy' to protest the carnage in Gaza, which is devoid of tangible pressure on Israel, it is quite

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possible that normalization talks resume as soon as headlines fade or a cease-fire agreement proves to be lasting, and a watery compromise on the future of the Palestinian issue is agreed.

Keywords Normalization · Mohammed bin Salman · Intelligence cooperation · Defense treaty · Iran · Abraham Accords

Introduction

After '10/7', relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia shifted from increasingly cordial to more of a wait-and-see attitude. While Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had announced in late September 2023 that 'every day we move closer to normalization' (Aitken 2023), his tone changed in the following months. Riyadh gradually adopted a more cautious approach, illustrated by the crown prince's description of Israeli behavior in the Gaza Strip as a 'collective genocide'. (ECFR 2024; ICG, 2024; Cook 2024). Nevertheless, even after the carnage in Gaza halted talks between Washington and Riyadh, negotiators indicated several times that a deal may be imminent, highlighting just how temporary the pause in talks might turn out to be. In the course of 2024, it was even reported that Saudi and U.S. diplomats were 'finalizing the details' of an accord (Keating 2024). Such an accord would combine a bilateral security, nuclear, and weapons deal between Riyadh and Washington with normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israeli, probably followed by more intense intelligence and security cooperation. It can be expected that any sustained cease-fire in Gaza will further strengthen and accelerate this process.

Opinions vary widely on the likelihood of a 'normalization deal', the idea of which has been kept afloat during the many months of extreme Israeli violence in Gaza. On the one hand, there are voices that tirelessly advocate for seizing the momentum of the Abraham Accords and reaching an agreement as soon as possible. Dennis Ross is the spokesman for this line of thinking (Ross 2024). It is in the same vein that Elie Podeh lists six significant advantages of normalization for Israel (Podeh

2024a).[1] In these circles, there is consensus that it is not so much 'if' but 'when' a deal will be concluded. On the other hand, there is a growing chorus of skeptical voices, ranging from mild criticism to sharp condemnation (Dassa Kaye 2023; Pillar 2024; Pressman 2024; Fantappie and Nasr 2024; Kurtzner and Miller 2023; Al-Sheikh 2024; Wright 2024). A recurring issue in all criticisms is the risk of squandering Palestinian rights for better bilateral ties with Saudi Arabia. Some criticasters assume that, behind closed doors, Mohammed bin Salman has had his cards on Israel for quite some time. Rightly or wrongly, he is thought to assume that his future and Israel's are intimately intertwined (Arab Digest 2023).[2]

Remarkably, the possibility of a defense agreement with the U.S. *without* formal Israeli-Saudi relations is barely scrutinized.

What to make of these mixed views? This chapter sketches the historical background of Saudi-Israeli relations. It also explores Riyadh's position vis-à-vis Palestine before the Gaza war. Next, it undertakes a similar analysis of Saudi policies *after* 7 October 2023. Moreover, the chapter briefly outlines what a triangular deal between the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Israel might look like from Riyadh's perspective. Finally, it discusses possible trajectories for such a deal in the years ahead.

The 'Secret' History of Israeli-Saudi Relations

Should it ever come to Saudi diplomatic recognition of Israel, it should not be forgotten that this could never have come about without decades of informal and under-the-radar ties between both countries. Contacts go back to the 1930s—that is, they even pre-date the creation of the state of Israel—and include regular dialogue between Ben-Gurion, later Israel's first prime minister, and Fu'ad Hamza, King Abdul Aziz's foreign adviser (Podeh 2018). However, from 1945 onwards, the Kingdom joined the

[1] Podeh reminds his readers what Mohammed bin Salman told Jewish leaders in April 2018: 'Over the past 40 years, the Palestinian leadership has repeatedly missed opportunities and rejected all the offers it was given. It's time for the Palestinians to accept proposals and come to the negotiating table—or shut up and stop complaining' (Podeh 2024b). Such statements are suspiciously similar to those made by Prince Bandar bin Sultan in his 2020 Al Arabiya interview, in which even more venomous language was used (Al Arabiya English, October 7, 2020).

[2] It is noteworthy that, after Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018, Netanyahu, in one of his White House lobbying efforts to keep Mohammed bin Salman out of trouble, proudly observed 'I saved [MB's] ass' (Hashemi (2020), based on Bob Woodward's *Rage*, 2020).

Arab League's boycott of companies dealing with Zionists in Palestine. After 1948 this would become a full boycott of Israel. It also opposed the U.N. Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947 and has not officially recognized the State of Israel to date.

Yet, Israel and Saudi Arabia were on the same side during the heyday of Nasserism in the 1960s. This was evident during the war in Yemen when Israel as well as Saudi Arabia provided various forms of support to Yemeni royalist militants. King Faisal also refrained from sending troops to Egypt during the six-day war in 1967 and even enabled indirect economic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel by means of the Trans-Arabian pipeline. During the October War of 1973, Saudi troops did not fight, but Riyadh was a full partner in the wartime oil embargo of Israel and the West under the auspices of OAPEC. From the early 1980s, Saudi Arabia was involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process. At the time of the 1991 Gulf War, Israel and Saudi Arabia faced Iraq's Saddam Hussein as their common adversary. Following the war, the first formal public meeting between Saudi and Israeli officials took place during the Madrid peace conference and in the following years Saudi Arabia quietly supported the Oslo process. From the mid-2000s onwards the 'cold war' between Iran and (mainly) Saudi Arabia was in full swing, enabling direct yet secret talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia. It was during the Lebanon War of 2006 that intelligence cooperation between the two countries really took off. On the Saudi side, Prince Bandar bin Sultan (then head of the Saudi National Security Council) was instrumental in forging close relations between the countries' intelligence agencies against a backdrop of shared threat perceptions, such as Iran's mounting regional influence, Tehran's nuclear program, the rise of non-state armed groups and president Obama's declared 'pivot to Asia'. In that same year, the Arab Uprisings created a shared fear of regional democratization with a real possibility of religiously based parties coming to power, first and foremost in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood entered office (Hamid 2022; Hashemi 2020).

All this led to what Jones and Guzansky describe as a 'tacit security regime', which resonated with Israel's 'periphery doctrine' of the 1950s (Jones and Guzansky 2019). This policy concept refers to Israel's clandestine ties with non-Arab minority groups (for example in Iraq and Southern Sudan) but also with non-Arab state actors—most famously Turkey, Ethiopia, and Iran. The doctrine, the brainchild of Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, was meant to prevent and/or weaken

any united Arab front. In some cases, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, it lasted till the late 1980s/early 1990s (Parsi 2007). During the 2010s, Saudi-Israeli relations developed in fields like intelligence, agriculture, cyber technology, medicine and the economy to the point that both countries fell short of mutual diplomatic recognition, but maintained many of the features of 'normal relations' (Podeh 2018: 579, Haniehc 2017). In 2020, Netanyahu and Mossad chief Yossi Cohen visited Saudi Arabia and met with Mohammed bin Salman. In April 2024, Riyadh provided intelligence on Iran's impending military attack, which marked a major contribution to Israel's largely successful repulse of the assault.

Saudi Arabia and the Question of Palestine Before '10/7'

The centrality of 'Palestine' to Middle Eastern politics and Saudi Arabia's view of it has gone through three phases with time: (1) from 1948 until the 2011 uprisings Palestine was a significant factor in Saudi foreign policy that aspired to contribute to a positive conflict resolution for the various Palestinian populations; (2) from 2011 to 2023, it was absent in the regional geopolitical equation and less of a Saudi priority while (3) after October 7 it returned to regional and Saudi foreign politics with a vengeance, but mostly as a negative factor—i.e., impeding or blocking the realization of other Saudi priorities (Valbjørn et al. 2024).

Although Pan-Arabism declined in the 1970s at state level, Palestine continued to play a prominent role in how Arab regimes related to Israel. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. After the 1973–1974 oil embargo, Riyadh launched an eight-point peace plan in 1981, including implicit recognition of Israel, in a bid to initiate negotiations about the Palestinian issue. Unfortunately, Crown Prince Fahd did not make any impression on the Israeli government. In February 2002, shortly after '9/11' and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Crown Prince Abdullah made a second attempt. His plan, based on full normalization of relations with Israel in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, gained prominence through the Arab League as the 'Arab Peace Initiative' (Kostiner 2005; Shtayyeh 2024). Israeli Prime Minister Sharon did not even bother to respond, however. Nevertheless, Palestine remained a central symbol and reference point for Saudi foreign policy (Valbjørn et al. 2024).

The Palestinian issue shifted to the background after the Arab Uprisings of 2011 as other conflicts took center stage. Popular mobilizations

against autocratic regimes that resulted in the ousting of the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were foremost on the mind of the Saudi royal family since they posed a direct threat to its rule. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates soon embarked on a counter-revolutionary course that sought to undermine newly minted revolutionary regimes. At the same time, regional politics is increasingly sectarianized (Allinson 2022; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Potter 2013; Matthiesen 2013). Iran's intervention in Syria gave this phenomenon a major boost by transforming what began as a political uprising against Assad into a conflict with pronounced sectarian dimensions. The intervention involved political, financial, and military support for the Assad regime, which is dominated by the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam. Tehran's policies increased Sunni-Shia tensions as many Sunni-majority opposition groups framed their rebellion as a fight against Shia dominance, which was exacerbated by Iran's explicit alignment with the regime in Damascus.

The politics of sectarian framing were also quite evident in the case of Yemen where Saudi Arabia emphasized the connection of the Houthis with Iran to garner regional and international support. Specifically, by portraying the Houthis as 'Shia' insurgents backed by Iran, Riyadh was able to frame its intervention as countering Iranian influence, which in turn resonated with Western concerns about Iran's regional ambitions via the 'axis of resistance'. However, the Houthis are predominantly Zaydi Shia Muslims, which is rather distinct from the Twelver Shia Islam practiced in Iran. Zaydi theology is historically closer to Sunni Islam in some respects.[3]

The near total neglect of the occupation of the Palestinian territories had become evident in the early 2020s when Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan signed the Abraham Accords. Saudi Arabia was not (yet) ready at the time, although negotiations were ongoing and the Crown Prince showed guarded optimism about a deal. In March 2022, he crossed the Rubicon by declaring: 'We don't look at Israel as an enemy, we look at it as a potential ally' (France 24, 2022). While the Saudi regime hardly paid any attention to the Palestinians, support for their cause remained undiminished among the Saudi population. Hamas's attack on 7 October

[3] During the first Arab 'Cold War' between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s, the kingdom backed the Shia Zaydi imamate against revolutionary Yemeni republicans.

2023 and the subsequent Israeli assault on Gaza had a transformational impact, however. The Palestinian issue returned to the heart of regional and Saudi politics with Arab popular sympathy for the Palestinain cause now extending across the Global South (Valbjørn et al. 2024).

Saudi Arabia and the Question of Palestine After 7 October

How did the Saudi government react to 7 October 2023 and what about Saudi public opinion? Although there is no need to go as far as Cook by claiming that Saudi Arabia has been 'mysteriously absent in the Israel-Hamas war', it can safely be said that Riyadh's disapproval of Israel's war in Gaza has remained 'tepid' (Cook 2023; Belkaid 2024). What Riyadh did in recent months was to draw on its convening power in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Conference after conference was held via the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League. All these summits were accompanied by grandiose tirades and pontificating final statements, but also silent inaction. There was not even a call for international sanctions on Israel like those that Russia faced after its invasion of Ukraine, or a radical re-examination of the normalization process (Belkaid 2024; Rabbani 2024; Coates Ulrichsen 2023).

Domestically, the Saudi government did take action, but not in favor of the Palestinians. For instance, the government-sponsored a social media campaign against the Palestinians, using slogans such as 'Palestinians sold their lands', 'Palestinians hate us', 'Palestine is not my cause' through to 'Israel is not my enemy' (Nasser 2024). The notorious Saud Al Qahtani, former Royal Court advisor on social media affairs and suspected of direct involvement in Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder, used his 'army of electronic flies' to promote pro-Israel accounts (O'Toole 2022). Other well-known pro-MbS media figures, such as Saud Al Shammari, spoke flippantly on Israeli TV about the atrocities in Gaza. In an attempt to suppress pro-Palestinian dissent, Saudi security forces worked overtime. Although the government did not forbid consumer boycotts of Western brands perceived to support Israel, most public expressions of pro-Palestinian sentiment, be it a tweet, post, or video, became banned and could be cause for immediate arrest (Arab Digest 2023; Keating

2024).[4] Israeli spyware (including Pegasus) is used extensively to monitor dissidents.

It is not only through social media that the Saudi government seeks to justify its policies of rhetorical condemnation of and silent inaction toward Israel. The Saudi religious establishment—which has been fully subservient to the regime for several years now—has been used for the same purpose. This happens in numerous ways via the Muslim World League and through sermons by the imams of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, for example, who has emphasized positive relations with Jews in the past. Many an imam quoted from the Quran to explain that Palestine is also the homeland of Jews. Alternatively, they lay all the blame for the tragedy in Gaza at the doorstep of Hamas and even the Muslim Brotherhood (Zalayat 2024).[5] Just like at the time of the Oslo Accords, when Saudi Arabia quietly supported peace negotiations, Saudi religious authorities can refer to the fatwa of Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who legitimized a peace treaty with Israel based on the legal precedent of the Treaty of Hudaybiyya (628). In that treaty, Prophet Mohammed entered into a ten-year truce with Mecca, which was under control of the polytheistic Quraysh tribal leadership at the time (Podeh 2018).

Indeed, there is hardly any open opposition in Saudi Arabia to the normalization diplomacy that MBS has continued to pursue.[6] Nevertheless, pro-Palestinian sentiments prevail among broad swathes of the Saudi population. Regular polls have been conducted on this topic by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy since the Abraham Accords of 2020. The latest poll dates from November to December 2023. The trend

[4] This government policy may explain Saudi interlocutors' reluctance to express independent opinions on the matter of normalization. With a few exceptions, in his communications with colleagues, the writer of this article was confronted with either total silence or 'his master's voice' kind of utterances.

[5] It is well known that many Arab leaders are secretly as keen to be rid of Hamas as the Israelis are. Former Saudi spy chief, Turki al-Faisal, is less restrained in this matter and regularly shows his disgust for Hamas.

[6] Opposition to regime policies comes in different forms. Regarding normalization, three trends can be discerned: the religious dimension, using Islamic arguments to reject peace with Israel; second, the liberal opposition in exile, which warns that ties with Israel may empower the regime and increase human rights violations; and thirdly a pro-Palestinian dimension that disagrees normalization would favor the Palestinian cause (Zalayat 2024).

in public responses is clear: from mild skepticism about Saudi government policy toward Israel before '10/7' to outspoken criticism of Saudi government policy afterward. In the latest poll, 96 percent of Saudis voiced the sentiment that Arab countries should cut all ties with Israel in protest of the war in Gaza (Nereim 2023; Cleveland and Pollock 2023).[7] This is broadly in line with the results of another public opinion poll, held in 16 Arab countries and conducted by the Arab Center Washington D.C. in cooperation with The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). In that poll, 95 percent of Saudis opined that the Palestinian question concerns *all* Arabs and not just Palestinians (Arab Center, 2024). Aware of these views, fully cognizant of Saudi Arabia's prominent position in the Arab world and mindful of its leading role in the Islamic world as custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, what kind of normalization policies could the Saudi elites pursue in the context of occupation, annexation, and Gaza?

Turbid Texts

The Saudi 'ceaseless quest for security' (Safran 1985), which is reinforced by the perception of the U.S. 'leaving' the Middle East, makes the intended agreement between Riyadh and Washington the primary prize of any three-way normalization deal for the Kingdom (Pillar 2024; Coates Ulrichsen, 2024; Wight 2024). It would be modeled on the defense pacts Washington has with non-NATO countries like Japan and South Korea. In addition, the deal would include American assistance to help Saudi Arabia build a civilian nuclear reactor and give it access to more advanced weaponry. While it will be possible to agree on additional armaments for the Saudi armed forces as long as Israel's qualitative edge is not endangered, the other elements might face greater barriers in U.S. Congress.[8] However, since the election of Donald Trump, the Republicans hold a majority in Congress and it is likely that everything will be done to get

[7] As Zayalat rightly adds, 'Although the timing of the poll may have influenced the response, it should be noted that even before the war, 87 percent of Saudis believed that Israel could eventually be defeated, and only five percent agreed that world Jewry should be respected and that relations with them should be improved' (Zayalt 2024: 5).

[8] For a solid appraisal of Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions, including pathways to an atomic weapon, see Julian Reich, 'The Nuclear Kingdom: Assessing Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Behavior'.

to an agreement during the first half of Trump's second presidency, i.e., before the U.S. midterm elections in 2026 when Republicans might lose control of Congress once more (Miller 2023; Barel 2024; Byman et al. 2024; Herrera 2023; Ibish 2023, 2024).[9] However strong the Trump's 'signature aspiration' might be, success is far from assured as Saudi Arabia is not popular in the U.S.

Against the backdrop of an increasingly multipolar regional system, it should likewise be questioned that a U.S.-Saudi security deal would actually succeed in detaching Saudi Arabia from China and Russia, as envisaged by Washington (Darwich et al. 2024; Valbjørn et al. 2024; Gause 2024; Young 2024; Xiaotong 2024). For the purposes of this Chapter, however, it is more relevant to shed light on Saudi Arabia's maneuvering space regarding recognition of Israel. As noted, Saudi officials adopted tougher language in their criticism of Israeli actions after 7 October 2023. Riyadh sounds increasingly assertive in crafting formulas on the 'Significant Palestinian Component' (Ibish 2024). At its core, this would involve an Israeli commitment to a 'practical pathway'—sometimes also phrased as 'credible' or 'irreversible'—that leads to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Apart from the fact that Israel—Netanyahu or virtually any political alternative to him—wants nothing to do with this, it is unclear what such a pathway means in operational terms. Even statements by the Saudi foreign ministry that indicate normalization can only take place after 'an independent Palestinian state is recognized ... and all Israeli occupation forces withdraw from Gaza' leaves room for interpretation (ICG, 2024). As the International Crisis Group notes: 'It is difficult to gauge how firm this demand is, and whether in the Saudi view other [Western] countries could recognize a Palestinian state before it exists on the ground, but for now the formula provides a lever in negotiations, especially with the U.S.' (ICG, 2024). Moreover, putting real pressure on Israel would require a completely different set of actions that go far beyond bold statements (Belkaid 2024). Lastly, as Pressman points out, there is a notable difference with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. The official Saudi position back then was that diplomatic relations with Israel could only be established *after the establishment* of a Palestinian state. This antecedent makes the current wording used by Washington

[9] A so-called plan B, according to which Saudi Arabia would be able to refrain from recognizing Israel and still get the much-wanted agreements with the U.S., is a non-starter (Saab 2024; Barel 2024).

and Riyadh look muddy and has more of a window-dressing feeling to it than that it sounds as a demand for serious concessions. Unlike in 2002, today's approach gives leverage away (i.e., Saudi recognition) because, once granted, it can no longer be used to press Israel to make meaningful concessions vis-à-vis Palestine (Pressman 2024).

A Lack of Credibility

There is little reason to doubt that the quest for Saudi-Israeli normalization will continue under a Trump presidency, the more so if a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas would last. It might even become the principal goal of U.S. planning for the post-war period. Though American officials are aware that the facts on the ground have shifted, they still cling on to their pre-October 7 vision and remain bullish about the prospect of some kind of arrangement. It would advance broader U.S. interests in the Middle East. More precisely, it would advance further economic (and political) integration of Israel with the Gulf States in a manner favorable to U.S. interests. As convincingly argued by Adam Hanieh, U.S. strategy in the Middle East has become to rest upon two core pillars: Israel on one side, and the Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia in the first place), on the other. Since the 1990s, a variety of mechanisms have been employed to enable Israel's economic integration into the wider Middle East—such as deepening of economic liberalization, the introduction of so-called Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), and the promotion of a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). 'The central axis of these inter-regional dynamics remains the connection between Israel and the Gulf states' (Hanieh 2024). If realized, Saudi-Israeli normalization would be the culmination of this process. The Abraham Accords (2020–2021), resulting in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between several Arab countries and Israel, were another major step in that undertaking.

But, as indicated above, the road to normalization is not without obstacles. Some are more difficult to overcome than others. For the time being, the war in Gaza has blocked any transformative breakthrough toward a triangular deal that can seal the normalization process. More importantly, while Saudi emphasis on the Palestinian aspect of such a deal—which has been partly designed to serve as an optical compensation for Riyadh's inaction during the war—is greater than before, Israel's rejection of a two-state formula seems insurmountable. Yet, surprises

cannot be ruled out, especially after a cease-fire agreement was reached in late January 2025 (but subsequently broken by Israel in March 2025). President Trump could use his leverage and ambition to cut deals to knock heads together in both Israel and Saudi Arabia, for example, based on a formula of 'creative fudging and constructive ambiguity' (Ibish 2024), most probably underpinned by an open-ended process toward a Palestinian 'state'. Much like in the 'Peace to Prosperity' proposal, originally launched in 2020 and purported to be a model for two states, this time the Palestinians would be under greater pressure to agree. In this formula, Israel would be allowed to annex over 30 percent of the occupied West Bank in return for the recognition of Palestinian statehood. This design of a two-state 'solution' could provide the Saudis with the much-needed pretense for normalization with Israel. Such a deal then would help Riyadh to obtain a ratified security agreement with Washington, while saving its reputation in the Arab world. The Palestinians would lose out.

Another scenario, though less likely, is that somewhere down the road the Saudis may assess their relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran differently than they have up to this point. They might conclude at some point that the threat from Tehran is greater than that of pro-Palestinian Arab sentiment and consequently drop their advocacy of a Palestinian state based on that assessment. Like in the previous scenario, the Palestinians would be thrown under the bus. In virtually every conceivable scenario the Saudi government's narrative that normalization promotes the Palestinian cause lacks credibility and Mohammed bin Salman will have a hard time convincing his own people. However, in an autocratic context like Saudi Arabia with a crown prince as headstrong as he is ambitious, it is conceivable that some watery compromise might be agreed under pressure of Washington. For Mohammed bin Salman that would probably not be a problem as long as Saudi interests—rather than Palestinian ones—are promoted along with it.

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