

SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL - FACING A NEW TEST REGARDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FORMAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving dynamics of Saudi Arabia–Israel relations within the broader context of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the U.S.-brokered normalization framework. While Saudi Arabia has not formally joined the Abraham Accords, recent diplomatic, economic, and security interactions indicate a gradual shift toward pragmatic engagement. This article explores the strategic motivations driving this rapprochement, including shared concerns over Iran, and the influence of shifting U.S. regional policies. It also analyzes domestic and regional constraints, particularly the unresolved Palestinian question and intra-Arab public opinion. Using a combination of qualitative analysis and regional policy review, the paper assesses the prospects and potential implications of formal normalization for regional stability, security architectures, and the future of Arab–Israeli relations. Ultimately, the study argues that Saudi–Israeli normalization represents both an outcome and a catalyst of a transforming Middle East order, where traditional ideological divides are increasingly subordinated to strategic and economic pragmatism.

Israel and Saudi Arabia - a short introduction of one of the most complicated and bitter relations

Or rather, the lack thereof brings to light a rather unusual reality, namely that the State of Israel and Saudi Arabia have never had formal diplomatic relations¹. This fact is particularly related to the Saudi kingdom's position on the Palestinian issue, more specifically, its support for the Palestinians, as evidenced by the actions of the Riyadh regime. For example, in 1947, Saudi Arabia was one of the countries in the region that voted against the United Nations Plan for the Partition of Palestine². Then, on two separate occasions, Saudi troops fought against Israel in two wars, namely the First Arab–Israeli War (1948) and the Yom Kippur War (1973)³.

Tensions between the two countries continued in the years that followed, maintaining the perception, in both capitals and beyond, of a lack of interest in formal diplomatic relations. Thus, the period that followed was marked by the same reluctance on the part of the Saudis to open official relations with the State of Israel, repeatedly demanding, over time, Israel's withdrawal from the areas occupied in 1967.

Then, the normalization of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran changed things in the region. More precisely, due to the notable diplomatic successes in 2023, China came to the fore by mediating talks that culminated in Saudi Arabia and Iran agreeing in March 2023 to normalize relations between the two countries, after decades of rivalry for influence in the Middle East⁴.

This success of Beijing was followed by efforts on the part of the United States, with Washington attempting to broker one of the most significant agreements that could have been possible in 2024, should the goal of contributing to the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have been achieved.

Thus, after March 10, 2023, and the signing in Beijing of the agreement to normalize relations between Riyadh and Tehran, the US engaged in a diplomatic effort aimed at persuading the Saudi kingdom and the State of Israel to “bury the hatchet”. Several months followed in which signals from all three international actors seemed to indicate

¹ Yoel, G., *Shifts in Saudi Arabia's Position on Normalization*, The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 22 May 2025,

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/shifts-in-saudi-arabias-position-on-normalization-209467>.

² *Palestine question at the UN (1947-1975)/CEIRPP Historical backgrounder (A/AC.183/L.3)*, The Question of Palestine, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-186560/>.

³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Arab–Israeli wars*, Britannica, 29 September 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Israeli-wars>.

⁴ William Figueroa, *Iran–Saudi Normalization: A Regional Process with Chinese Characteristics*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 24 March 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/iran-saudi-normalization-a-regional-process-with-chinese-characteristics/>.

the same thing: the two sides remained interested in normalizing relations, while Washington retained its privileged position between them, presenting itself as the link between the two states that had been traditional enemies for decades.

So, with the first and most important condition met, namely the desire expressed by the two states - Saudi Arabia and Israel - to open talks to reach an agreement on normalizing relations, the main concern of the US was to identify how such an opportunity could be exploited, because, beyond the good intentions expressed by the two states, the reality on the ground was clearly going to have a significant say. A reality strongly influenced by the strategic interests of the two states directly involved in this normalization effort, to which are added two other regional actors - Iran and the Palestinian Authority / Palestinians, with different agendas and a strong influence on developments in the region.

Thus, discussions on normalizing relations, which would result in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, were conditioned at that time on the conditions signaled by the Riyadh regime, which sought advantages from the US in the form of reduced restrictions on the sale of American weapons to the Saudi kingdom, as well as assistance in developing a civilian nuclear program. Then, on the external dimension, the Saudi kingdom signaled that any agreement with Israel would require major progress on the creation of a Palestinian state⁵.

The inevitable rupture that occurred in the process of normalizing relations between the Saudis and Israelis following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023⁶, was handled by the US in a manner that was most conducive to moving forward with the agreement. Washington playing one of the most important roles in this regard, as it represents the link between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but also the guarantee for the two states that such an agreement will not act to the detriment of the interests of the signatory states.

Even though, in certain respects, contacts between the two “traditionally” hostile states have managed to reduce the perception of major differences between Saudis and Israelis, one example of this being that between 2023 and 2024, at the initiative of the Saudi authorities, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic content was removed from Saudi school textbooks, which can be interpreted as a reduction in the radical attitude of the Riyadh regime towards Israel and Zionism, but also as recognition of the presence of Jews in the region⁷, October 2023 almost entirely nullified all these efforts: the Riyadh regime decided to abandon any initiative aimed at continuing negotiations with the Israeli state, while a survey by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, conducted between November 14 and December 6, 2023, revealed a level of hostility among the Saudi population that cannot be ignored. Specifically, 96% of Saudis who responded to the questions believed that Arab countries should immediately sever all ties with Israel, while 95% of respondents did not believe that the Palestinian Hamas killed Israeli civilians during the raid on October 7, 2023. At the same time, 40% of them expressed a favorable opinion of Hamas⁸.

The year 2024 brought some hope on this issue with the statement by Khalid bin Bandar Al Saud, the Saudi ambassador to London, who told the BBC on January 9 last year that the Saudi monarchy is interested in peace and normalizing relations with Israel after the war, but only on condition that a Palestinian state is created⁹. Then, on May 4 of the same year, a signal of support for this direction came from Washington, through the voice of US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who said in an interview for the Financial Times that the Biden

⁵ *Possible U.S.-Saudi Agreements and Normalization with Israel: Considerations for Congress*, Congress.gov, 27 August 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48162>.

⁶ *Hamas attack aimed to disrupt Saudi-Israel normalization, Biden says*, Reuters, 21 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-attack-aimed-disrupt-saudi-israel-normalization-biden-2023-10-20/>.

⁷ Gianluca Pacchiani, *Saudi Arabia largely removes negative portrayal of Israel from its school curriculum*, The Times of Israel, 4 June 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-arabia-largely-removes-negative-portrayal-of-israel-from-its-school-curriculum/>.

⁸ Catherine Cleveland, David Pollock, *New Poll Sheds Light on Saudi Views of Israel-Hamas War*, FIKRA Forum, 21 December 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-sheds-light-saudi-views-israel-hamas-war#:~:text=When%20Saudis%20were%20asked%20in%20August%20whether,our%20relations%20with%20them%2C%E2%80%9D%20just%205%25%20agreed.>

⁹ David Gritten, *Saudi Arabia interested in Israel normalisation deal after war*, BBC News, 9 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67922238>.

administration would not sign a defense agreement with Saudi Arabia in the absence of an agreement to normalize relations between the Saudi kingdom and the State of Israel, explaining the situation by saying that “you can’t disentangle one piece from the others”¹⁰.

The US’s important role as a link between Saudi Arabia and Israel

In an interview given by US President Donald Trump on October 15, 2025, to Times Magazine and published on October 23, the leader in Washington “predicted” that Saudi Arabia and Israel would normalize relations by the end of this year. “I think we are very close. I think Saudi Arabia is going to lead the way”, the American leader replied when asked about the normalization of relations between the Saudi kingdom and the State of Israel. To justify his optimistic view, Trump explained that the two countries “had a Gaza problem and they had an Iran problem”, but “now they don’t have those two problems”. Then, when asked if he believed that “Saudi Arabia will join the Abraham Accords by the end of the year” he replied, “Yes, I do! I do”¹¹.

Based on the above, we could say that Donald Trump’s “prediction” regarding the normalization of Saudi Arabia-Israel relations is more than bold, a characteristic that is not out of the ordinary for the American president. Similarly, we can say that these statements are not necessarily wishful thinking, given that the history of relations between the Saudis and the Israelis reveals a desire, at least in words, to formalize and establish diplomatic ties.

Furthermore, the current context offers the United States of America the opportunity to represent the balance between the two states and, implicitly, the actor that can influence the progress towards normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, given that both countries have an interest in maintaining the best possible relations with the US, while the US, in turn, is interested in such a development that would, at least declaratively, nullify the enmity between them, each of which is an important piece in maintaining the US position in the Middle East.

Returning to Trump’s interview for Time magazine, in which he mentioned that he would visit the Gaza Strip at some point, the White House leader said he did not see Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as the leader of the Palestinians. “They don’t have a leader right now, at least a visible leader, and they don’t really want to, because every one of those leaders has been shot and killed. It’s not a hot job”.¹²

Discussing the two issues in the same interview, namely the normalization of Saudi Arabia-Israel relations and the future of the Palestinians, is not inappropriate, given that October 7, 2023, almost nullified previous efforts on this subject and brought back to the forefront the rethinking of the conditions imposed by the Saudis on the Israelis. Riyadh has never abandoned the idea of supporting the creation of a Palestinian state, but while testing the waters for the possible normalization of relations with Israel, it has prioritized the conditions imposed on it in a different order. Now, however, after the most recent Hamas-Israel conflict, Saudi Arabia has brought the condition of creating a Palestinian state back to the forefront, which, despite the optimism displayed by US President Donald Trump, may hinder progress in this direction.

The manner in which this condition is perceived in Israel may also contribute to slowing down the normalization process, at least given that Israeli officials do not take this issue seriously. A recent example is the intervention of Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who, on October 23, 2025, said he would not agree to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia if it meant creating a Palestinian state. Moreover, he spoke disparagingly about the Saudis, saying that they could “continue to ride camels”¹³.

This stance towards Saudi Arabia and the efforts made so far to normalize relations between the two countries has been criticized by the opposition in Israel, which has accused the Israeli finance minister of ignorance and of actions that harm Israel, and for not speaking on behalf of the Israeli state, demanding that he apologize.

¹⁰ Felicia Schwartz, Steff Chávez, Andrew England, *US says defence pact with Saudi Arabia not possible without Israel deal*, Financial Times, 4 May 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f5b6401-6c7c-4f73-8bea-ca9e9a10e9ed>.

¹¹ Time staff, *Read the Full Transcript of Donald Trump’s Interview on the Gaza Ceasefire With TIME*, Time Magazine, 23 October 2025, <https://time.com/7327689/trump-israel-gaza-deal-interview-transcript/>.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Ariela Karmel, *Smotrich on Saudi normalization: ‘No thank you, keep riding camels’*, The Times of Israel, 23 October 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/smotrich-on-saudi-normalization-no-thank-you-keep-riding-camels/.

A few hours later, the apology came from the person in question, but it was accompanied by a warning: “My comment about Saudi Arabia was absolutely inappropriate, and I apologize for the insult it caused.”, Bezalel Smotrich added at the same time: “I expect from the Saudis not to do us harm and not to deny our heritage, our tradition and the rights of the Jewish people to its historic homelands in Judea and Samaria, and to establish true peace with us”¹⁴.

In the context of Smotrich's statements, it is important to note that they came in the context of the vote on October 22, 2025, in the Knesset, to adopt a bill in preliminary reading regarding the application of Israeli sovereignty over settlements in the West Bank¹⁵. The subject is extremely sensitive, especially given the wave of sympathy shown by countries that announced in September this year their willingness to recognize the existence of a Palestinian state, with a large part of the coalition led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling for progress on the annexation of territories in the West Bank. In September, the Israeli finance minister brought up the annexation of 82% of the West Bank, despite signals from countries in the region that such a move could spell the end of Israel's integration into the region¹⁶.

Just as such a move would be detrimental to Israel's good relations with the US, given the recent developments that have led to the mutual release of hostages and talk of the much-desired peace, Donald Trump argues that the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel is not only possible but could happen in a relatively short period of time. Donald Trump's stated intention to welcome Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House in November¹⁷ to discuss, among other things, the normalization of relations between the two states, increases the pressure surrounding this issue, causing the two states involved—the Saudi kingdom and the Israeli state—to weigh their decisions very carefully, especially so as not to upset the leader in Washington and, why not, to save face. In the sense that, if this normalization does not take place, the responsibility for such a failure should not be attributed to either of the two parties. In other words, neither Saudi Arabia nor Israel has any interest in remaining in the perception of the United States, more specifically Donald Trump, that they contributed to the failure of this initiative.

Based on this reality, the Israeli finance minister's change of heart regarding Saudi Arabia can be explained, just as the Saudi kingdom is pushing the idea that the American leader's interest in achieving such a success—mediating normalization between the Saudis and Israelis—will push things in the direction desired by Riyadh. In fact, each of the two sides is trying to achieve maximum gain, and this is also evident from the Saudis' position on the Knesset vote. Specifically, Saudi Arabia said that “The kingdom stresses its complete rejection of all settlements and expansionist violations perpetrated by the Israeli occupation authorities”, as stated on October 23, 2025, by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in an official statement. The Saudi monarchy also emphasized that “The kingdom reiterates its support for the inherent and historical right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant international resolutions”¹⁸.

Instead of conclusions

¹⁴ Ariela Karmels, *Smotrich apologizes for his 'keep riding camels in the desert' jab at Saudi Arabia*, The Times of Israel, 23 October 2025,

https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/smotrich-apologizes-for-his-keep-riding-camels-jab-at-saudi-arabia/.

¹⁵ Tim Hume, *Israel's parliament advances bill to annex occupied West Bank*, Al Jazeera, 22 October 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/22/israels-parliament-advances-bill-to-annex-occupied-west-bank>.

¹⁶ Aaron Boxerman, *Far-Right Israeli Minister Calls for West Bank to Be Annexed*, The New York Times, 3 September 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/03/world/middleeast/israel-west-bank-annexations.html>.

¹⁷ Steve Holland, *Saudi Crown Prince bin Salman will visit Trump on Nov 18*, White House official says, Reuters, 4 November 2025,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/saudi-crown-prince-bin-salman-will-visit-trump-november-18-white-house-official-2025-11-03/>.

¹⁸ *Saudi Arabia denounces Knesset's advancement of West Bank annexation bills*, The Times of Israel, 23 October 2025,

https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/saudi-arabia-slams-knessets-advancement-of-west-bank-annexation-bills/.

Returning to Trump's recent statements, it is clear that they are linked to the American leader's desire to rekindle the two states' interest in continuing efforts to normalize relations between them, now that the war in Gaza is considered, at least for the moment, to have reached a point where such an initiative can be reexamined. Moreover, it is the American leader's personal desire to contribute to such a development, which would coincide with the regional realignment in favor of peace and stability, a realignment initiated in 2020 with the Abraham Accords, while the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in them would seal his legacy in foreign policy, as well as the foundations for developments that should significantly change the Arab political order

Hamas's literal and figurative dynamiting of the region and efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, following the attack in October 2023, is now being reversed by Donald Trump's renewed efforts and confidence in reviving this initiative. And the American leader's interest is all the greater given that the weight of "sealing" a normalization between the two states is also due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is not just another Arab state, but the custodian of the two most important holy sites for Islam - Mecca and Medina, a state whose economy is based on its wealth of energy resources and major influence in this field, as well as Riyadh's desire to have the capacity to politically influence the entire Arab and Islamic world. It is precisely these elements that make possible normalization with Israel so important, as it could be seen as a domino effect in all other Arab and Muslim states, while for Israel, Saudi Arabia's recognition of the Israeli state would represent the achievement of a major goal.

Then, beyond the regional effects of such a development, normalization would give the US a dominant position by strengthening the US-led bloc from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, with direct effects on limiting both Iran and China at the regional level.

But, despite the major stakes for the main actors involved in these efforts—Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the US—developments in this direction remain uncertain. This is because, beyond the aforementioned aspects, several issues continue to affect this complex process. A key factor is the situation in Iran, the main regional adversary of both Saudi Arabia and Israel, with the caveat that the normalization of relations between Riyadh and Tehran has not, in reality, completely eliminated the rivalry between the two states.

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