Saudi Arabia and the Abraham Accords

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HeadlineSaudi Arabia and Israel: A Complicated Route Toward Normalisation

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Overall Summary Saudi Arabia's approach to Israel reflects its broader ambition to become a leading regional and global power, using normalisation as leverage for US security support, economic modernization and influence over the post-war Middle East.

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Saudi Arabia and Israel – A Complicated Route Towards Normalisation

1. Introduction

Since rejecting the UN Partition Plan for Palestine and fighting against Israel in the 1948 war, Saudi Arabia has come a long way in their relationship with its Red Sea neighbour. It's not a secret that security officials from both sides have stayed in regular contact since at least 2014, but the question of official normalization will not be only a symbolic gesture of cooperation between a home of Sunni Muslims and Jews, but also a final triumph of Prime Minister Netanyahu's push for regional peace and stability without dealing with Palestinian statehood first.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the Saudi Arabian approach to Israel before and after a series of military conflicts involving the latter between 2023 and 2026. The central point of the paper will be the Abraham Accords, a framework created by Israel in cooperation with the US, offered to regional powers as a tool guaranteeing primarily economic opportunities to any of the signatories. As of June 2026, 4 Muslim countries joined the Accords: Bahrain, UAE, Morocco, and Sudan, but with Saudi Arabia being the primary target of Israelis negotiators.

This Paper will first discuss changes implemented by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) in Saudi Arabia, its economy, and society. Then the issues regarding the impact of the wars will be talked through. Finally, the authors analyse scenarios of the ongoing peace talks with Iran and how they can influence Saudi Arabian foreign policy.

2. Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Stance

Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential geopolitical actors in the Middle East. The kingdom combines several sources of power: vast oil wealth, control over major energy resources, religious legitimacy through its custodianship of Mecca and Medina, and a long-standing security relationship with the United States. As an authoritarian monarchy and rentier state, Saudi Arabia has used its oil revenues not only for domestic stability, but also to project influence across the region.

Its regional role is visible in several areas: rivalry with Iran, involvement in Yemen, leadership within the Gulf, and participation in diplomatic initiatives concerning regional conflicts. Because of this position, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices often have consequences beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Understanding Riyadh's geopolitical vision is therefore essential for understanding broader Middle Eastern politics.

The argument is that Saudi Arabia's interest in normalisation was mainly driven by strategic incentives rather than ideological alignment with Israel.

These incentives included stronger security guarantees from the United States, cooperation against Iran, access to Israeli technology and investment, support for Vision 2030, and greater regional influence. At the same time, Saudi Arabia had to balance these interests with its symbolic role as a defender of the Palestinian cause and custodian of Islam's holiest sites.

3. Mohammed bin Salman's Westernisation

Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has increasingly presented itself not merely as an oil-rich regional kingdom, but as an emerging global power. This vision is clearly reflected in Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy, attract foreign investment, expand tourism and entertainment, and reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil. MBS has repeatedly framed these reforms as a return to a more "moderate" and globally open Saudi Arabia, rather than a rejection of Saudi identity. This is important because it shows that Saudi foreign policy is closely connected to a broader domestic transformation project: Saudi Arabia wants to be seen as a modern, powerful and internationally connected state.

This ambition is visible in Saudi Arabia's investment in tourism, entertainment and sport. The kingdom aims to attract 150 million tourists per year by 2030, has hosted major international music and entertainment events, and has invested heavily in football, boxing, Formula One, golf and other global sports. Saudi Arabia has also been selected to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, which fits its strategy of using sport and mega-events to increase visibility, tourism and soft power. MBS has been unusually explicit about this logic: when asked about "sportswashing", he said that if sport increases GDP, Saudi Arabia would continue doing it. In this sense, social reforms such as allowing women to drive, reopening cinemas, relaxing some gender-segregation rules and hosting global artists should not only be understood as liberalisation, but also as part of a wider geopolitical and economic strategy to make Saudi Arabia more attractive to investors, tourists and international partners.

4. The Israeli Question

This broader vision also helps explain Saudi Arabia's cautious interest in normalisation with Israel before October 7, 2023. Joining or moving closer to the Abraham Accords was not simply about friendship with Israel, but about Saudi Arabia's strategic ambition to become a central diplomatic, economic and security actor in the region. Normalisation could have strengthened ties with the United States, improved access to technology and investment, supported Vision 2030, and created a stronger regional front against Iran. At the same time, Saudi Arabia had to balance this with its religious legitimacy and symbolic role in the Muslim world, especially regarding Palestine. This is why MBS stated shortly before October 7 that

normalisation with Israel was getting closer, but also emphasised that the Palestinian issue remained important. Saudi Arabia's position can therefore be understood as pragmatic: it was willing to consider normalisation if it served its larger goal of becoming a global power, but it could not completely abandon the Palestinian question.

4.1 October 7th and Aftermath

The 2023-2026 regional wars flipped the script based on which Saudi Arabia is approaching its relationship with Israel. Before the conflict, joining the Abraham Accords was considered part of the normalisation of bilateral relations, fitting perfectly into geopolitical realities of the time. After the war, the Saudi government wants to reevaluate the balance of power and play a key part in creating a new regional order.

Saudi Arabia gained additional leverage after October 7 because Israel's international reputation weakened and criticism of the war in Gaza intensified. As a result, Saudi recognition became even more valuable for Israel. This is because it would help restore regional legitimacy and signal that normalization with the Arab and Muslim world was still possible. Washington also had a strong interest in such a deal; it would strengthen the American-led regional order. This placed Riyadh in a stronger position. By making Palestinian statehood a necessary condition for normalization, Saudi Arabia could present itself not only as a strategic partner of the United States but also as a defender of Palestinian rights and a responsible regional power.

5. Saudi's Foreign Policy Dilemmas

At the beginning of 2026, Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia were heavily involved in discussions to create "islamic NATO", a defence pact providing a regional alternative to the current intercontinental one. Ultimately, Turkey opted out, but increased cooperation between key actors in the Middle East, who didn't work together before, shows the volatility of the region. In March, the same trio, with the addition of Egypt, met in Riyadh to discuss the war and its consequences. Since then, three other meetings of that quartet took place, proving the willingness of Riyadh to expand its geopolitical horizons.

Looking beyond geopolitical issues, the war has pushed Muslim societies around the region to oppose any form of public and official cooperation with Israel. Saudi Arabia, as the spiritual home of Sunni Muslims, has always stated that providing credible solutions for the establishment of the Palestinian State is a prerequisite to any positive solutions of Israeli – Saudi negotiations, but the war and public anger against IDF's actions in Gaza made it set in stone. In addition, the credibility of the US as an honest broker of Israeli-Palestinian peace steadily declined in the eyes of the Saudis after the establishment of "Board of Peace" and when plans of "Trump's Gaza" were revealed.

6. The Great Iranian Question

As much as it may all look bleak from the outset, the outcome of the war in Iran still has paramount importance for the Saudi Arabian – Israeli relationship, with US support and involvement.

In case of prolonged war with recurring attacks, any form of diplomatic normalisation with Israel will be seen as wildly unpopular with the Saudi population, so although cooperation with the Israelis and the US will continue behind the scenes, no strategic pivot would be expected in the short and medium term. In the long run, the inability to end the war with an economically bankrupt state of Iran might put the credibility of the US, and Israel by extension, into doubt and diminish potential rewards from the normalization of the picture.

If the war ends with a stable ceasefire, the geopolitical landscape of the region wouldn't change much, therefore creating the possibility to continue constructive dialogue. In the medium to long term, without another conflict initiated by the Israelis, Muslim societies in wealthy states like Saudi Arabia could gradually warm up to the idea of expanding their relationship with another country in the region having a lot to offer economically. As another Knesset elections coming this fall can bring a change of leadership and steer it to the negotiating table with the Palestinians, there is a high chance that a credible solution to the Palestinian problem, even without full statehood, could be enough for the Saudis to formalize their relationship with Israel

In the admittedly highly unlikely scenario of regime change in Iran, Saudi Arabia will reevaluate their whole foreign policy paradigm, as the current structure is built around the idea of Islamic "holy war" and protecting itself from the Iranian threat. If the threat evaporates, the main short-term incentives to normalize the relationship with Israel disappear with it, and Saudi Arabia will concentrate on expanding their sphere of influence in the region. However, if the US will still be a credible provider of security for Saudi Arabia, Saudis will sooner or later align their new sphere of influence around the American regional defence architecture, paving the way to join the Abraham Accords in the longer run.

Conclusions

In the last decade, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel increased, because both states, although suspicious of each other, worked together in fear of their common threat – Iran. As the two biggest allies of the US in the region, this direction of travel of the relationship seems to be lasting, but the speed and formality of it remains under the shadow of the still ongoing war. There is no doubt in Jerusalem or Riyadh that cooperation between them is needed. But official normalisation will limit the US and Israel's incentives to push for a two-state solution with Palestine, which is not an outcome acceptable to the Saudi royal family and their role as custodians of Sunni Muslims, or the Saudi society.