

Dossier: Israel-Palestine Conflict

# Israeli-Saudi Normalization: A Collateral Victim of 7 October\*

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The attacks of 7 October 2023 and the destruction of Gaza have radically altered the balance of power in the Middle East. The process of normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab world, accelerated by the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, is its main victim, since everything seems to indicate that the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia will not happen in the short or medium terms.

After the failure of the Oslo Process, the Palestinian issue was relegated to the back burner not only by the Western community, but also by the Arab world. Despite their differences in approach, the Trump and Biden administrations agreed on the need to put the Israeli-Arab normalization process before the resolution of the Palestinian issue, in line with the position of recent Israeli administrations, which have promoted the maxim “peace for security” to replace the preceding “land for peace.” Now, after two decades of ostracism, it has regained centrality on the regional and international stage.

If the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, later joined by Sudan and Morocco, made one thing clear, it was that the resolution of the Palestinian question is no longer a *sine qua non* condition for the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab world. Israel thus took a giant step forward by getting Arab countries to agree to establish full diplomatic relations without their prior withdrawal from the occupied territories or

recognition of Palestinian national rights, which implied abandoning the Arab Peace Initiative adopted at the Beirut Summit in 2002.

However, the military campaign against the Gaza Strip, which in its first nine months has killed 38,000 people and injured another 88,000 (70% of them civilians), represents a turning point, as it has forced some Arab countries to recalibrate their process of rapprochement with Israel. While it is true that, in the aftermath of 7 October, many Gulf countries showed solidarity with Israel, the destruction of the Gaza Strip and the devastating humanitarian crisis it unleashed has forced them to adopt a more critical stance. A good example of this is Saudi Arabia's drastic shift from negotiating the normalization of relations with Tel Aviv to making it conditional on a ceasefire, the reconstruction of Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

## A Normalization on Hold

In the days following 7 October, there was speculation that the main objective of the attack that left 1,140 dead and 240 kidnapped was to torpedo normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia in line with Iran's interests. Over time, however, the theory has gained weight that the need to respond to the Benjamin Netanyahu administration's plans aimed at extending Israeli sovereignty to the occupied territories of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem weighed much more heavily in the execution of the attack.

Indeed, in the document “Our Narrative... Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” in which Hamas gives its version of

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events, no mention is made of the Abraham Accords. This document stresses that the attack should be seen first and foremost as a reaction to “Israeli Judaization plans to the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque,” “the practices of the extremist and right-wing Israeli government which is practically taking steps towards annexing the entire West Bank and Jerusalem [...] to expel Palestinians from their homes and areas,” “the thousands of Palestinian detainees in Israeli jails,” “the unjust air, sea and land blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip over 17 years,” and “the expansion of the Israeli settlements across the West Bank in an unprecedented level, as well as the daily violence perpetrated by settlers against Palestinians and their properties.” Only in the last point of the 18-page communiqué does it state: “We call for keeping the popular pressure around the world until ending the occupation; we call for standing against the normalization attempts with the Israeli entity and for a comprehensive boycott to the Israeli occupation and its backers.” It follows from the above that the main objective of 7 October was not so much to prevent the normalization process from moving forward as to respond to Israeli annexationist policies. However, it should not be overlooked that Hamas is one of the links in the so-called Axis of Resistance commanded by Iran and also comprising the Syrian regime, the Lebanese militia Hezbollah and other Shiite formations across the Middle East such as Iraq’s al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) and Yemen’s Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis). Iran and its allies would be the main victims of the possible establishment of full relations between Tel Aviv and Riyadh, which would accentuate the isolation of Tehran and its satellites.

Israeli-Saudi normalization has been one of President Joe Biden’s main focuses since his arrival at the White House. In general terms, the Biden administration’s foreign policy has been conditioned by the decisions taken by his predecessor in office. In this regard, it is worth recalling that President Donald Trump had two major objectives in the Middle East. On the one hand, to boycott the G5+1 nuclear deal by means of the doctrine of “maximum pressure” against Iran in an attempt to suffocate the Iranian regime. On the other hand, to push for the normalization of relations between Israel and the main Gulf Arab states at the expense of Palestinian national rights through the 2020 Abraham Accords.

Jared Kushner, Trump’s adviser on the Arab-Israeli dossier, put forward a plan to replace the principle of “land for peace” with that of “peace to prosperity” in the pretentiously named Deal of the Century, which ended without much fanfare. In this formula, the most the Palestinians could hope for was economic improvement in exchange for giving up their national claims and resigning themselves to living indefinitely under Israeli apartheid rule. A proposal that bore many parallels to the 2017 Smotrich Plan, put forward by the current Israeli Finance Minister and strongman of the Netanyahu government.

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At the Manama Summit on 25-26 June 2019, Kushner promised to mobilize 50 billion to fund an ambitious development programme in the Middle East that would improve living conditions in the Palestinian territories. For Israeli analyst Avi Issacharoff (2019), it was more like the Bribe of the Century, as “the economic portion of the ‘Deal of the Century’ [...] may be summed up as a fairly blatant attempt to bribe the Palestinian people. [...] It involves an enormous sum of money: approximately \$50 billion that are slated to bolster several Middle Eastern economies, and of which a significant part will be transferred to the Palestinian territories.”

This proposal served to pave the way for the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which were signed on 15 September 2020 at the White House. At the signing, President Trump said the agreement marked “the dawn of a new Middle East” and would “serve as the foundation for a comprehensive peace across the entire region.” The agreements were presented as a

historic opportunity for peace in the Middle East, although their aim was rather to establish a broad front to contain Iran's growing regional influence. The contrast between rhetoric and reality was evident from the outset, as the agreements relegated the Palestinian cause to the background, ignoring and evading any reference to the two-state solution and Palestinian national rights.

This factor explains the strong rejection it generated among the Arab population. Different polls show that there is a clear divorce between rulers and ruled when it comes to the establishment of full relations with Israel. According to the Arab Opinion Index 2022, 84% of respondents in 14 Arab countries between June and December 2022 expressed opposition to their governments' normalizing relations with Israel, with only 8% in favour (ACW, 2023). Public opinion was most vehemently opposed in Algeria and Mauritania, with rates close to 99%, followed by Libya with 96%, Jordan with 94%, Iraq with 92% and Tunisia with 90%. In the case of Saudi Arabia, 5% of respondents were in favour, 38% were against and 57% did not answer. Nearly half of the respondents said that the main reason for opposing normalization was Israel's colonization policies and its desire to annex the Palestinian territories.

The Israeli military campaign against the Gaza Strip has shown that the normalization agreements have not fostered peace, but rather the opposite, as they have created the breeding ground for an escalation of the conflict. In reality, the only beneficiaries of the agreements have been the signatory countries, as they have "facilitated greater security coordination [...] around repression. For example, the UAE has expanded the scope of its engagement with Israeli companies specializing in repressive technologies, and has invested in the Israeli defense industry" (El Kurd, 2023).

### **Saudi Arabia: The Great Unanswered Question Mark**

Despite the drastic changes in the regional arena in recent years, Saudi Arabia remains one of the central players in the Arab system. Today, the priorities of Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's strongman since his appointment as crown prince in 2017, are to shield his power and guarantee a peaceful transition that will

lead him to the head of state, as well as to consolidate Saudi Arabia's specific weight on a regional and international scale. The instrument to achieve this is the so-called Vision 2030, which seeks to "position Saudi Arabia as the 'heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds,' turn it into a 'global investment powerhouse,' and make it a 'global hub connecting three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa.'" (Baabood, 2023).

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Within the framework of this strategy, the Palestinian issue had become less prominent over time and had eventually been relegated to the background. The traditional Saudi position is reflected in the 1981 Fahd Plan, which supports Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied during the 1967 war and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, together with East Jerusalem. The 2002 Beirut Initiative, promoted by King Abdullah, offered full normalization between the Arab world and Israel in exchange for Palestinian independence. Mohammed bin Salman's accession to power radically altered this approach, as the crown prince "indicated an openness to normalization with Israel, albeit under certain conditions" (Wallis, 2023) relating to US guarantees of the Kingdom's security and defence. Indeed, Prince Bin Salman acknowledged to Fox News on 20 September 2023 that "every day we get closer" to an agreement and that normalization would be "the biggest historical deal since the end of the Cold War" (Aitken, 2023). Two days later, Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly to announce the emergence of "a new Middle East" and an imminent agreement with Saudi Arabia, brandishing a map showing Israel occupying all the territories between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In this sense, it should be noted that an eventual normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel would cause a shift in regional alliances and leave clear winners and losers. In the opinion of analyst Jake Wallis

(2023), “If normalization goes ahead, it will reinforce the centrality of Saudi Arabia’s more activist role in the region, cement Israel’s acceptance by the Arab world, and bolster America’s presence in the region at the expense of a rising China.” The benefits for Israel would be unquestionable, as “peace with the Arab world [would] render the Palestinian issue marginal at the regional and international levels and a mere Israeli domestic matter” (ACRPS, 2023), which would enable it to intensify its *fait-accomplis* policies and accelerate the process of annexing the occupied territories. The 7 October attacks led to an overhaul of Mohammed bin Salman’s entire policy, as they questioned his strategy to marginalize the Palestinian issue and normalize relations with Israel as a means of strengthening the Saudi alliance with the United States and curbing Iranian expansionism. After the launch of the military offensive against the Gaza Strip, Saudi officials were forced to adopt a much more critical stance towards Israel and its systematic violations of international humanitarian law. In an attempt to regain the initiative, Riyadh convened a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on 11 November 2023, whose concise statement called for an immediate ceasefire, the entry of humanitarian aid and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Saudi Arabia’s growing activism is not only due to its central role in the Arab and Islamic sphere, but also to the need to counteract Iran’s prominence as the main advocate of the Palestinian cause (Ulrichsen, 2024). As noted above, Hamas is part of the Axis of Resistance and its members are the only ones to have responded militarily to the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip, as has been the case with the Shiite militias of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Ansar Allah in Yemen, which have respectively launched attacks against northern Israel and hindered maritime traffic in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Following the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus that killed several Revolutionary Guard commanders on 1 April, Iran launched a surprise attack on Israeli military installations with more than 300 drones and missiles in an unprecedented move since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Given the deteriorating situation in the Gaza Strip, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has indefinitely frozen negotiations with Israel and made any possible agreement conditional on the prior establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. His For-

eign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, has been particularly active in recent months. On 8 February 2024, Riyadh hosted a meeting of the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority at which a common agenda for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and the establishment of a Palestinian state was discussed. The meeting emphasized the need to end the war, reach an immediate ceasefire, ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with International Humanitarian Law and lift all restrictions preventing the entry of humanitarian aid.

This change in Saudi attitude can be attributed not only to the need to counteract the Iranian regime’s prominence, but also to the widespread rejection of Saudi public opinion towards the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. According to a poll conducted by The Washington Institute between 14 November and 6 December 2023, 96% of Saudis believed that “Arab countries should immediately break all diplomatic, political, economic, and any other contacts with Israel, in protest against its military action in Gaza.” Moreover, 91% of respondents agreed with the statement that “despite the destruction and loss of life, this war in Gaza is a win for the Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims.” Indeed, after the 7 October attack, Hamas’s image in the Kingdom improved significantly, with 40% having a positive image of the movement compared to 10% in an August survey. Some 87% of Saudis even agreed with the suggestion that “recent events show that Israel is so weak and internally divided that it can be defeated some day” (Cleveland and Pollock, 2023).

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In a survey conducted between 12 December 2023 and 5 January 2024 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha with a much larger sample

of respondents (8,000 in a total of 16 Arab countries), the results are even more conclusive (ACRPS, 2024). Eighty-nine per cent rejected recognition of Israel outright, compared to 4% who supported it; in the case of Saudi Arabia, those rejecting normalization had grown by 30%, going from 38% to 68% (with a high number of undecided). An overwhelming majority – 92% of respondents in total – saw the Palestinian cause as an issue concerning all Arabs, not just Palestinians. In the specific case of Saudi Arabia, 95% shared this opinion (up from 69% the previous year). Even 70% considered the Hamas attack as a legitimate resistance operation against the Israeli occupation. What most respondents also agreed with – 94% – was a negative assessment of the role played by both the US and the main European actors: France (79%), the United Kingdom (78%) and Germany (75%). Eighty-one per cent felt that the US was not credible in its support for the establishment of a Palestinian state and 77% even considered it the greatest threat to security and stability in the Middle East.

Although the authoritarian nature of Arab regimes prevents public opinion trends from finding a significant echo in the political arena, they cannot be completely ignored either. This was one of the main lessons to be drawn from the Arab Spring of 2011, which demonstrated not only the divorce between rulers and ruled, but also that the former could no longer systematically disregard the concerns of the latter. Indeed, polls show that the Palestinian issue continues to be considered by the majority of the Arab population as a common cause that cannot be abandoned to its fate.

Despite the above, the Biden administration has not completely lost hope and continues to see normalization between Tel Aviv and Riyadh as its main trump card in regaining the initiative in the Middle East. In a race against time, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other senior US government officials have made numerous official visits to Saudi Arabia to try to reactivate the normalization process with Israel and ultimately link it to a ceasefire and the reconstruction of Gaza. According to sources familiar with these negotiations, this plan would also “tie rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia to substantial [and irreversible] steps toward Palestinian statehood,” (Mackinnon and Gramer, 2024).

In any case, it seems clear that the chances of success of this mediation are extremely limited and are

no more than a desperate attempt to repair the immense reputational damage caused by President Biden’s unconditional support for Israel over the past nine months, including a \$26 billion aid package for arms purchases. Saudi Arabia therefore intends to take advantage of the US administration’s weak position, not only to extract concessions on defence and security issues, but also to obtain guarantees regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state. In this sense, it should be noted that “if Mohammed bin Salman can present himself as the man who succeeded where so many others have failed, it would reinforce Saudi narratives that position the Kingdom as central to the evolving regional order” (Ulrichsen, 2024).

### The Abraham Accords are likely to survive the war on Gaza, as economic, political, security and defence interests now far outweigh support for the Palestinian issue

The main stumbling block to furthering this Israeli-Saudi normalization remains Prime Minister Netanyahu’s refusal to halt the offensive against Gaza and accept Palestinian statehood, as well as the reluctance of his government partners to make any territorial concessions to the Palestinian side. It should be taken into account that one of his radical government’s top priorities is to accelerate the colonization of the occupied territories and extend Israeli sovereignty to the whole of the West Bank. According to Walles (2023), “with Netanyahu trapped in a coalition government whose far-right elements are complicating his attempts to balance domestic and foreign priorities, the task for Biden and his team will prove a difficult one,” if not practically impossible.

Everything seems to indicate that, given the complete destruction of the Gaza Strip and the drastic changes taking place in the area, it will take a significant amount of time for the normalization process to resume. In that hypothetical case, Riyadh is very likely to introduce greater demands regarding the resolution of the Palestinian question, as it is difficult for the Saudi kingdom to establish relations with Is-

rael at the current juncture, due to the internal and regional costs it would have to assume, since it cannot ignore the opinion of its subjects.

With regard to the validity of the Abraham Accords, it should be stressed that none of the Arab countries that endorsed them have, at least for the time being, interrupted diplomatic relations with Israel, which is evidence that the signatories believe that these relations should be preserved against all odds, as they represent a long-term strategic commitment. The Abraham Accords are likely to survive the war on Gaza, as economic, political, security and defence interests now far outweigh support for the Palestinian issue, even though it has regained its centrality on the international stage and enjoys broad support in Arab societies as a whole.

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