

Saudi Israeli Relations: The Benefits and Implications of an Alliance

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ABSTRACT

As the power dynamics in the Middle East change, with Iran gaining power and influence, relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel are changing as well. While previously in an antagonistic relationship, the two countries would benefit from developing an alliance. However, the cultural and social implications, especially in terms of Israel's occupation of Jerusalem and the Islamic significance of the city, must be considered. Despite these reservations, an alliance could prove beneficial as Saudi Arabia could encourage and move forward with a peace process between Israel and Palestine. In addition, Israel could help improve Saudi Arabia's defense against Iran – an issue important to both countries – and speed up the economic transformation currently taking place in the country as it moves away from dependence on oil. Given these benefits, and the likelihood that there will be little internal opposition to an alliance, the development of a relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel would strengthen Saudi Arabia as a country and improve stability in the Middle Eastern region.

Historical Background

The Saudi Crown Prince and de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman recently made the following statement: "We share many common interests with Israel. If there is peace, there will be many common interests between Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council member states." (Niu). This statement is part of the first steps Saudi Arabia is taking toward normalizing relations with Israel and possibly developing political relations.

Since the formation of Israel in 1948, the conflict between the Arab world and Israel has been a defining factor in the political state of the Middle East. As an Islamic leader and one of the most influential countries in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Historically, it has taken an uncompromising attitude toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, prioritizing Arab and Islamic nationalism (Niu).

In 1948, 1967, and 1973, Saudi Arabia participated – in unity with other Arab nations – in the war against Israel. It created the 'three no's policy' which stated that Saudi Arabia did not recognize, reconcile to, or negotiate with Israel while providing economic and military aid to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Niu). Under the rule of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Saudi Arabia and the Organization of the Islamic Conference encouraged the United Nations (UN) to officially recognize Palestine, with King Faisal declaring that "all countries should wage war against the Zionists, who are there to destroy all human organizations and to destroy civilization," (Ulrichsen).

Yet despite this clear declaration against Israel, Saudi Arabia's military action against the country was limited – neither its regular army nor volunteers were directly involved in fighting during the Palestine War of 1948 (Abadi). According to Jacob Abadi, Adjunct Professor at the Pratt Institute, only 4500 men, 10 tanks, and 40 aircraft were supplied by Saudi Arabia during the Six-Day War (whereas the total Arab force was over 250,000 men, 2000 tanks, and 950 aircraft). Condemnation of Israel was mainly limited to political statements against Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip and attacks on Palestinian guerrilla fighters. In addition, this

condemnation was not only borne out of support for the Palestinians but also out of fear that the unrest would result in Israel infringing upon Saudi territory. A visit by US President Eisenhower to Saudi Arabia on June 30, 1957, publicized this concern, where King Saud stated that the Israelis had invaded Saudi Arabian territory several times (Abadi).

The first steps towards the end of antagonization against Israel were voiced during the same visit when King Saud stated that while Saudi Arabia views Israel as “a bitter enemy in [their] own backyard,” it was not willing to collaborate with the Soviet Union in an anti-Israeli campaign like Egypt and Syria have (Abadi). This breaking down of unity among Arab nations opened the way for the first cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s support of UN resolutions 242 and 338, which demanded Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands in return for recognition of an independent Jewish state, also showed that Saudi Arabia was not unwilling to recognize Israel as a state in the future. One early example of Saudi-Israeli cooperation was the Mivtza Rotev (Operation Sauce) during the Yemenite Civil War. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser supported Abdallah al-Sallal and the Republicans in the Yemenite Civil War against the Royalist regime of Imam al-Badr. This prompted Saudi Arabia to supply its Royalist allies with arms through Israel’s Mivtza Rotev, which was a series of covert airlifts to Royalists in Yemen. This cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia took place based on the common interest of preventing the spread of Nasser’s Egypt across the Arabian Peninsula (Abadi).

The 2003 Iraq War, which increased Iran’s influence in the Middle East, only furthered this clandestine cooperation based on common security interests (Niu). In addition, the Abraham Accords, signed on August 13, 2020, by the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and later Bahrain signal a new era where Arab nations are actively pursuing normalization of relations with Israel (Guzansky). While the movement of Saudi Arabia in this direction can have significant negative societal and religious implications – especially in terms of Israeli encroachment on Palestine and the Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of Rock – the benefits of developing this relationship in terms of Saudi defense against Iran, the diversification of the Saudi economy, and the possibility that Saudi Arabia can encourage Israel to pursue peace in Palestine must be considered.

Religious and Societal Implications

The religious and societal implications of Saudi Arabia – home to Mecca, Islam’s holiest city, and an international leader in Islam – developing cooperative political relations with Israel – a state occupying Islam’s third holiest site – are profound. The ownership of Jerusalem has been one of the root causes of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for years, and Israel’s occupation of and actions in the city have been the source of many conflicts.

However, developments such as US President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017 have seen Saudi Arabia minimizing its public opposition to Israel. In fact, the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Jordan even warned its citizens to refrain from participating in anti-American protests and demonstrations taking place across the country. While the King of Saudi Arabia expressed his opinion that the “United States’ approach is dangerous,” the country denied Jordan’s request to convene an emergency Arab Summit to address the Jerusalem issue (Niu). The King reassured other Arab leaders that his nation would work hard to maintain the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative, which committed to establishing the State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, but no concrete action was taken. This symbolic and low-key form of opposition was met with some hostility by Palestinians, who claimed that “our Arab brothers (the Gulf region) stabbed us in the back and the front abandoned us politically but supported Israel” (Niu).

This decline in public support for Palestine is also opposed by groups within Saudi Arabia, with one young Saudi citizen in Riyadh telling AFP that it is “difficult for this [cooperation] to happen between [Saudi and Israelis]. I won’t support it” (Chopra). A rare public opinion poll by the Washington Institute also shows that only 36% of the population supports the Abraham Accords, and only 36% supports the growth of open sports and business contacts with Israelis (Pollock). In addition, leaders within the religious institutions of Saudi Arabia, such as Saad Al-Shehthri, a conservative member of the Council of Senior Scholars who is known for

his opposition to recent social reforms taking place in the country, are still influential advisors in the government who might hold strong views against the development of a relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel (Farouk). Given this opposition within the country and the potential regional implications, the government must take into consideration the societal factor when pursuing a relationship with Israel.

However, with the recent centralization and restructuring of the government by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the likelihood of internal opposition to Saudi-Israeli relations is unlikely. The Crown Prince has explained that Saudi Arabia's religious policies are no longer "committed blindly" to the teachings of Wahhabism, the main religious doctrine in Saudi Arabia (Farouk). Technical amendments to religious doctrine and the increased central control of religious authority ensure that the government can control the narrative being put out by organizations like the Council of Senior Scholars and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance. While senior leaders with conservative opinions within these organizations have not been removed, the bypassing of their approval before making governmental changes shows a shift in the leadership style of the country. In addition, it allows the Crown Prince to maintain the trust of the public in the religious leadership of the country while continuing to move forward in modernization. An example of this is the 2018 decision to allow women to drive, a move that was clearly in opposition to the stated position of religious leaders in the country but which was officially supported by these leaders when the decision was made public (Farouk).

Furthermore, anti-Semitism – such as the description of Jews and non-Muslims as "swines" and "apes" in school textbooks – in education is being revised as the Crown Prince attempts to combat religious extremism. Saudi analyst Najah al-Otaibi has also stated that the Saudi government has officially prohibited the "disparagement of Jews and Christians in mosques" (Chopra). Abdulrahman al-Sudais, the imam of the holy city of Mecca's Grand Mosque displayed this new warming of relations between Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Jews when he spoke of Prophet Mohammed's friendly relations with and religious tolerance of Jews (Chopra). These examples of the progress the government is making in reducing anti-Semitism in the country and preparing them for an official relationship with Israel are evidence of the likelihood that there will be little internal opposition to such a relationship.

However, the appearance of 'betraying' their fellow Arabs has already impacted Saudi Arabia's national image, and may not be beneficial in helping the country maintain its status as a regional leader. Turkey, a country vying for regional leadership, is already gaining support from Arab countries as it calls for conflict mediation and the resolution of the Palestine issue. The 2017 and 2018 Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings were held in Turkey, and another online meeting initiated by Turkey was held online in 2020, already signaling the weakening of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic leader (Niu).

Furthermore, this breaking of unity among Arab nations may add to the already existing internal contradictions and conflicts within the Middle East, worsening competition and further destabilizing the region. The Abraham Accords have already publicized the relations of several Arab countries with Israel – a move that was likely made with the approval of Saudi Arabia. If Saudi Arabia also publicizes its relationship with Israel, this may encourage other Arab countries to follow, according to Song Niu, associate professor at the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University. Without unity among Arab nations, a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may become impossible. If Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations and Israel are unable to reach a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the conflict's importance will decline and it may remain unaddressed for many more years (Niu).

A Conditional Cooperation

Taking into account the impact Saudi Arabia's cooperation with Israel will have on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, having the relationship be conditional on developing peace in the region may be beneficial. There is evidence to show that despite the steadfast refusal of Arab states to recognize Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not any closer to concluding. Between 1993 and 2009, the Israeli settler population in the West Bank and

East Jerusalem doubled to over 494,000 settlers (Farsakh). That population has reached 620,000 today (*Settlements*). Almost three decades have passed since the Oslo Accords – the first concrete agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, moving the countries in the direction of a peace process. Since then Israel has developed limited relations with several Arab states and continued settling on Palestinian territory, without any solution in sight. In 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry warned that “We’re running out of time. We’re running out of possibilities. And let’s be clear: If we do not succeed now [...] we may not get another chance” (Jensehaugen).

Today, Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman has stated that he believes that “the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land,” making Saudi Arabia’s position clear that the existence of both states must be part of any solution to the conflict (Imran).

Saudi Arabia has already played a major part in encouraging the peace process, putting forward the Fahd Peace Plan in 1981 after the Camp David Accords failed to address key issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Bahgat). The plan also came after the failure of Egyptian negotiators in getting Israel to agree to take steps that would ensure the rights of Arabs. In the plan, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia at the time introduced eight points for a “just peace,” including Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territory occupied in the 1967 war, the dismantling of illegal settlements, the creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes or be compensated. While the plan was well received by US President Ronald Reagan and Israeli leadership, the conditions it placed on Israel – especially withdrawal from all Arab territories – were not accepted (Bahgat).

The Abdallah Plan of 2002 was another peace plan introduced by Saudi Arabia after consultations with Egypt and Jordan and endorsed by other Arab leaders (Bahgat). The plan called for similar steps described in the Fahd Plan – including Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and complete independence for Palestine – but also offered Israel full peace with political, economic, and cultural normalization. The plan was supported by Palestinians, praised by Washington, and yet denied by the Israeli government in an official statement that declared that “withdrawal to the 1967 borders is an absolute blow to Israel’s security.” While these plans are examples of the disagreements between the Arab and Israeli views on peace, they are evidence that a conclusion can be reached with the Abdallah Plan and Fahd Plan as a basis for the peace agreement.

In 2007, the Saudi Peace Initiative (SPI) was reaffirmed by international leaders, with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana calling on the Arabs and Israel to at least use the initiative as a starting point for negotiations. The SPI was praised by Israel itself with Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz stating that it must be “used as a basis for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians” (Bahgat). One Israeli analyst declared that “it is the duty of the government of Israel not to reject the hand being offered by Saudi Arabia” (Bahgat). Given these positive reactions from Israel and the international community to Saudi Arabia’s initiatives in encouraging peace in the region, it is clear that it is possible to achieve a comprehensive peace. According to Gawdat Bahgat, professor of political science at the National Defense University, the praise of the Saudi peace initiatives by Israel is a result of the increasing cooperation between the two countries as the Iranian threat grows.

While this threat is an essential part of the cooperation between the two countries, complete normalization will not be possible unless the issue of Palestine is addressed, which makes the starting of the peace process even more eminent. According to Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, the Saudi foreign minister, Saudi Arabia “always envisioned that there will be full normalization with Israel,” however, that will not be possible unless “we address the issue of Palestine” (Nissenbaum). Prince Turki al Faisal, the former Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States has also stated to former Netanyahu advisor Yaakov Amidror that Saudi Arabia will move towards normalization once a peace agreement is reached with Palestine (Abadi). However, Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman has also reportedly warned that it is “about time that the Palestinians accept the offers and agree to come to the negotiating table,” signifying Saudi Arabia’s impatience and the importance it gives to the benefits of Saudi-Israeli cooperation in terms of defense against Iranian aggression

(Ulrichsen). The Abraham Accords are a sign that several Arab states are prioritizing their national security as the threat of Iranian and Islamic extremists increases and the future of US strategy in the Middle East remains unknown. According to Yoel Guzansky, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, there is also a possibility that a Saudi-Israeli peace agreement might provide Saudi Arabia with more American weaponry as it works to build up its nuclear power technology (a program that began with the secret assistance of the Trump administration). Furthermore, there seems to be a priority within the Saudi public as well in defense against Iran, with 25% of Saudi respondents of the survey by the Washington Institute choosing “working to contain Iran’s influence and activities” as their preference for the top US priority in the Middle East (Pollock). As a result, it seems that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a top priority for Saudi Arabia in its relationship with Israel, and it is likely that as the Iranian threat grows, concrete cooperation between the countries will not remain contingent on peace between Israel and Palestine.

Benefits of Cooperation for Defense Against Iran

Saudi Arabia’s de facto leader has stated that the country “share[s] many common interests with Israel,” more specifically the shared threat of Iran. With both countries being in an “asymmetrical relationship” with the United States – Israel being weaker in power and Saudi Arabia often being pressured to reform politically or compromise oil prices – both countries face the possibility of developing an equal and complementary relationship with one another. They may be able to work together to contain Iran, maintain regional security, and prevent nuclear proliferation in the region (Niu).

Saudi Arabia’s modern conflict with Iran began in 1979 when the rise of Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini brought a clash between the power of Shiite Islam and Saudi Wahhabism in the region (Beck). Since American intervention in Iraq, Iran’s power has only increased, with the country becoming involved in Yemen, Syria, and other countries following the Arab Spring. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is no longer purely out of sectarian competition but out of the fear that Iran’s political influence in the region is overtaking Saudi hegemony (Niu). The Iranian leadership’s brand of revolutionary Shi’ite Islam condemns monarchies and delegitimizes Saudi leadership, creating what Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies views as a domestic threat (Rynhold). Israel’s conflict with Iran also dates to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, after which Iran turned on the United States and its allies, viewing Israel as a symbol of western dominance. Since then, Iran has refused to recognize Israel, taking offense to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as an attack on Arabs and comparing Israel to a “cancerous tumor.” Israel shares a similar view of Iran, with former Prime Minister Netanyahu claiming that Iran “is devouring one nation after the other” and must be stopped (Imran).

With such similar views on Iran as their greatest enemy in the region, the development of an Israeli-Saudi alliance was to be expected. Riyadh has already facilitated Israeli bombers, allowing them to use its airspace (Imran). The Arab League, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, has also recently declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization that must be stopped (a position which is supported by Israel and the United States) (Beck). Iran has historically supported militant groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Jihad in Syria, Hamas in Palestine, and Houthis in Yemen, to increase their influence, and as a result, threaten both Saudi Arabia and Israel (Niu). The Houthis in particular have significantly threatened the security of Saudi Arabia, frequently launching attacks on oil plants near cities like Jeddah, and threatening the country’s land and sea channels. As a result, covert meetings between Saudi and Israeli officials have started to take place. Yemen is the first major war Saudi Arabia has participated in outside its borders, and the intelligence and strategic capabilities needed for this undertaking were gained from a relationship with Israel (source 19). Anwar Eshki, a retired Saudi general who chairs the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Jeddah, and Dore Gold, the director general of Israel’s ministry of foreign affairs and one of Netanyahu’s most trusted confidantes, have met on

several occasions to discuss the issue of Iran and regional security (Ulrichsen). Eshki also led a Saudi delegation to Israel in July 2016 where he told Tel Aviv newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth that “today we can easily single out common enemies.” Saudi newspaper Al Arabiya English also expressed its support for a Saudi-Israeli alliance in 2015, stating that the Israeli PM said it well when he claimed that “terror organizations, mostly backed by Iran,” are filling in the vacuum of power in the Middle East (Ulrichsen).

Today, while Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has recognized, as previously stated, the importance of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the growing threat of Iran is the main factor in the developing relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both countries are seeking security cooperation – even if that is an unofficial alliance – to boost their militaries, intelligence gathering, and arms sales (Niu). The pulling out of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (known colloquially as the Iran Nuclear Deal) was a move that was supported by both countries, but it has resulted in Iran moving closer to nuclear capability. Saudi Arabia and Israel both perceive the decline in US influence on Iran as a threat and view a possible alliance as the only route of defense against Iran (Baqai). According to Sumeera Imran, Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations at the National Defense University, even an alliance limited to the sharing of intelligence could pose a large threat to Iran. More sophisticated and well-planned joint operations against Iranian-backed militant groups in the region could occur, threatening the extent of Iran’s influence. Between 2010 and 2012, credible reports claimed that Saudi Arabia had granted Israel overflight permission in order to facilitate attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. The states also exchanged intelligence on Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and jihadist organizations (Rynhold). These limited ties have since progressed as the need for defense against Iran increases. Furthermore, if Saudi Arabia takes a lead in dealing with Israel, it could act as a mediator between Israel and other Arab states, further reducing the influence of Iran within the GCC (Imran). By becoming an addition to the already existing UAE-Israel-Bahrain alliance, Saudi Arabia will be able to reduce Iran’s security buffer, perhaps even making it more vulnerable to direct actions by Israel (Siddiq). Similarly, an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Israel could result in the addressing of the Palestine issue, which Saudi Arabia could use to weaken Iranian influence in Palestine by warning Israel of the benefits it gives Iran by stoking conflict in the region and occupying Palestinian territories (Imran).

Benefits of Cooperation for the Saudi Economy

In addition to the security benefits of an alliance with Israel, Saudi Arabia would greatly benefit from the support Israel could provide during its current economic transformation and development. Niu highlights that Saudi Arabia’s economic strength formed on the basis of oil production paired with Israel’s technological innovation capabilities and modern financial stability could provide for a future where the two countries could complement each other’s economic and technological development. The Saudi Crown Prince has publicly stated that “Israel is an attractive regional economic and technological center and a potential partner of Saudi Arabia” (Niu). The Crown Prince’s goal to diversify Saudi Arabia’s oil-dependent economy through his ‘Vision 2030’ has been focused on creating more job opportunities for locals and moving the country forward technologically (Niu). Salman Al-Ansari, the founder of the Saudi American Public Relations Affairs Committee highlighted that a “beneficial economic partnership” between Israel and Saudi Arabia might bring Vision 2030 to life (Podeh). One example of this is the ‘NEOM Project’: a project to construct a sustainable, self-sufficient, and technologically advanced city on the northeast corner of the Red Sea, bordering Egypt and Jordan (This Is Neom). This ambitious project by Saudi Arabia complements Israel’s ‘Red Sea-Mediterranean Railway Plan,’ possibly laying out the future for economic cooperation that could transform the geopolitical landscape of the region.

Advances are already underway, with Israel authorizing the NSO to sell spyware to Saudi Arabia in 2018 and Saudi Arabia authorizing former Trump administration official Jared Kushner to invest some of the country’s sovereign-wealth fund in Israeli companies for the first time. Saudi Arabia is also trying to gain full security control of two strategic Red Sea islands – Tiran and Sanafir – that have been a source of regional

tension between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for decades through a deal made by the United States (Niu; Nissenbaum). A 2018 Tony Blair Institute paper has estimated that the volume of indirect exports in 2016 from Israel to GCC countries (including Saudi Arabia) was around \$1 billion, making it the third largest Israeli export market in the Middle East (Podeh). This shows that while official routes for trade don't exist between the two countries yet, the foundations have been laid for a trade and economic partnership.

Conclusion

Both Saudi Arabia and Israel recognize that as changes occur in the power dynamics of the Middle East, governments must make changes and revisions in their official attitudes towards countries in the interest of national security. As the Iranian threat grows, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel will become more important. Currently, both countries' national security interests are in parallel in terms of the Iranian threat and in combating a repeat of the Arab Spring that might lead to the rise of extremist Islamic governments possibly backed by Iran. Cooperation in countering these threats is the most significant factor in the benefits of developing an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Furthermore, the possibility that Saudi Arabia will take this opportunity to propose a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine and bring further stability to the volatile region increases the benefits of such an alliance. If relations do become official, Saudi Arabia in particular would greatly benefit from the economic support Israel will be able to provide as relations with the United States cool down. Given these significant benefits and despite the limited religious implications of a Saudi-Israeli alliance, the movement of Saudi Arabia in a similar direction as the UAE and Bahrain would be greatly beneficial to both Saudi Arabia and the Middle Eastern region as a whole.

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