

Is KSA Destined to be the Last Country to Normalize Relations with Israel?

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Key Points

- The normalization of ties with Israel has started a new diplomatic era in the Middle East.
- Consistent Palestinian refusal of peace offers could be the reason for the Abraham Accords.
- Normalization of ties between Israel and KSA may be inevitable, but the degree of normalization is uncertain.
- KSA is an established regional power whose voice weighs both within the Arab countries, and the broader Muslim community, as custodian of two of the three of the most holy Muslim sites.
- KSA will prefer the protection of its people over historical hatred.
- Normalization of ties between KSA and Israel, without any peace deal between Israel and Palestine, is a missed opportunity.

Introduction

In August 2020, news came from the US that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had agreed with his United Arab Emirates (UAE) counterpart Mohamed bin Said Al Nahjan to begin normalizing relations between the two countries.¹ The following month, they signed the Abraham Accords together with Bahrain.² Both the Americans and the Israelis were enthusiastic that about the prospect that additional Middle East nations were planning on normalizing relations with Israel in the near future. The Palestinians officially and vehemently rejected the agreement between Israel and the UAE as "normalization for which we will get nothing."³ Many factions even spoke of a "knife blow to the back" by trusted Arab allies.⁴ Following the signing of the Abraham Accords by the UAE and Israel, then-US President Donald Trump announced the expectation that many Arab states, including the

¹ Sean Federico-O'Murchu, "Read the full statement by the US. Israel and UAE on normalizing Israel-UAE relations," *CNN*, Aug 13, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/13/middleeast/mideast-trump-full-statement-uae-israel-intl/index.html> (accessed Mar 9, 2021).

² Noa Landau, "FULL TEXT: The Israel-UAE-Bahrain Abraham Accords Peace Agreement," *Haaretz*, Sep 16, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-full-text-the-israel-uae-bahrain-abraham-accords-declaration-1.9159509> (accessed Mar 10, 2021).

³ Johannes Gerloff, "IZRAEL: Normalizace vztahů se SAE," (ISRAEL: The normalization of ties with UAE), *Neviditelný pes*, Oct 1, 2020, https://neviditelnypes.lidovky.cz/zahranici/izrael-normalizace-vztahu-se-sae.A200929_220031_p_zahranici_wag (accessed Mar 26, 2021)

⁴ Ibid.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), would soon follow.⁴ While this was not the case for KSA, the Sudan and Morocco both agreed to normalize ties with Israel in 2020.^{5,6}

The KSA government stayed, that normalization of ties with Israel is possible under certain conditions related to the Palestinian issue. If Israel offers the Palestinians a peace agreement that will be accepted by the Arab countries, there will be nothing to prevent normalization. But, if there is no agreement between Israel and Palestine, will KSA remain the last country in the region not to join the Abraham Accords?⁷

More Gulf States-Israel open trade relations will strengthen Israel's position as a permanent economic partner. Such relationships are leading to greater cooperation between Israel and Arab countries that have not yet signed the Accords. This improvement of cooperation includes KSA. If successful, the Abraham Accords will change Israel from a rejected state to a state that has historical and lasting ties to the region.⁸

The Abraham Accords could also be the result of the reluctance of Arab countries to help solve the Palestinian cause. This is mainly due to the persistent non-acceptance of peace offers by Palestine, and its inability to unite the Hamas and Fatah factions.^{10,11} Weakening Arab financial support to Palestine may be evidence of a growing reluctance.^{9,10,13}

Background Information

Israel was founded in 1948 and has been in constant fighting with its Arab neighbors ever since. The UAE made a bold decision to change this current situation and become the first Arab country in decades to declare peace, and establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

However, the Abraham Accords is not the first time Israel has signed a peace agreement with an Arab country. Israel maintains a so-called 'cold peace' with Egypt and Jordan. The 1994 Israeli-Jordan peace agreement began

⁴ TOI Staff and AFP, "Trump says Saudi Arabia among 7-9 countries expected to make peace with Israel," *Times of Israel*, Sep 16, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-says-saudi-arabia-among-7-9-countries-expected-to-make-peace-with-israel/> (accessed Feb 22, 2021).

⁵ Julie Stahl, "Israel-Morocco Sign Abraham Accords Declaration on Establishment of Ties," *CBN News*, Dec 23, 2020, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2020/december/israel-morocco-sign-abraham-accords-declaration-on-establishment-of-ties> (accessed Feb 23, 2021).

⁶ Menna Zaki, "Sudan signs deal normalising ties with Israel, agrees aid deal," *AFP*, Jan 6, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/sudan-signsdeal-normalising-ties-163514607.html> (accessed Feb 23, 2021).

⁷ Pratyaksha Mitra, "Gulf sector will benefit from cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel: Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal," *Newscast Pratyaksha*, Apr 3, 2021, <https://www.newscast-pratyaksha.com/english/gulf-sector-will-benefit-from-cooperation-between-saudi-arabia-israel/> (accessed Apr 5, 2021).

⁸ Elder of Zion, "'History Today' Distorts the History of the Abraham Accords," *The Algemeiner*, Feb 9, 2021, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/02/09/history-today-distorts-the-history-of-the-abraham-accords/> (accessed Mar 12, 2021).¹⁰ Ariel Ben Solomon, "Will Hamas and Fatah unite in force as Israel develops ties to Arab world?," *Jewish Nes Syndicate*, Sep 25, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/as-israel-makes-peace-with-arab-states-will-hamas-and-fatah-unite-against-israel/> (accessed Mar 31, 2021).¹¹

Hugh Fitzgerald, "Even the Arabs are Tired of Hamas," *Jidah Watch*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2021/05/even-the-arabs-are-tired-of-hamas> (accessed June 7, 2021).

⁹ Sarah Chemla, "Palestinian funding from Arab countries dropped by 85% in 2020," *Jerusalem Post*, Sep 24, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/palestinian-funding-from-arab-countries-dropped-by-85-percent-in-2020-643343> (accessed Mar 30, 2021).

¹⁰ Mordechai Kedar, "Do Arab States Really Support the Palestinians?" *The Algemeiner*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2020/09/29/do-arab-states-really-support-the-palestinians/> (accessed June 7, 2021).

to deteriorate after a short time, and now the relationship is stable, but cold.¹¹ The Camp David agreements, signed in 1978 between Egypt and Israel, were significant, but the persistence of hostilities since the country was at war meant that the Egyptian state press remained hostile to the Jewish state, and the Egyptian army continued training for war with Israel. Despite sharing borders, Israel ranked 27th amongst Egypt's trading partners in 2018, according to the World Bank.¹⁵

KSA opposed the Camp David agreement at the time. KSA broke diplomatic relations and stopped its aid to Egypt. These two countries renewed their ties again in 1987.¹⁶ The US is negotiating intensively for more Arab nations - especially KSA, the Gulf's largest power - to take the same step as those Arab countries who made peace and normalized relations with Israel.

As for a condensed history of Israeli-Saudi relations, KSA initially opposed the creation of the state of Israel and voted against the UN Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. Saudi troops then took part in the fight against Israel in the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. KSA also participated in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and transported about 2,000 troops to help Arab forces in Syria. In 2002, then Prince Abdullah began negotiations on the Palestinian situation and proposed the Saudi Initiative for ending the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts. The Initiative called for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, establishment of East Jerusalem as the capital of a new Palestinian state, and for Israel to cede territory in the Golan Heights, West Bank, and Gaza Strip. Although the Palestinian cause was not resolved, relations between KSA and Israel have warmed moderately since the talks.¹⁷

Analysis

KSA has been going through a difficult period, recently. Like other countries, it has been facing the COVID-19 pandemic, with the associated (until the recent resurgence) low oil prices, due to lower demand. The new US administration has begun its foreign policy by resetting relations with KSA, halting support for the war in Yemen, and suspending ongoing arms sales to the Kingdom.¹⁸ Further, the US State Department has removed Yemen's Houthis from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list in February of this year.¹⁹ The most important fact, however, is the normalization of ties between other Arab countries and Israel.

After the first reports on the possible normalization of the UAE's relations with Israel, the possibility of normalizing other Arab states emerged. King Salman announced that KSA could normalize its relations only if Israel agreed to a two-state solution for Palestine, and with Jerusalem as its capital.²⁰ While King Salman on the throne, it will be a very difficult step for KSA to normalize relations without huge Israeli concessions. However, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) may apply a more modern and liberal approach to the economic, political, cultural, and diplomatic domains. MBS commented as follows: "I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their land. But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for

[accords/#:~:text=Sept.%2015%2C%2020%2C%20a%20historic%20peace%20initiative%20was,founded%20in%20the%20Middle%20East—Christianity%2C%20Islam%20and%20Judaism..](#) (accessed Mar 11, 2021).

¹⁵ World Integrated Trade Solution, "Egypt, Arab Rep. trade balance, exports and imports by country 2018," Worldbank.org,

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/EGY/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country> (accessed July 23, 2021).

¹⁶ Ahmet Uysal, "Political legacy of Hosni Mubarak," Anadolu Agency, Feb 29, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/political-legacy-of-hosni-mubarak/1749676> (accessed Mar 4, 2021).

¹¹ Neal Hogberg, "Abraham Accords," *Life, Hope & Truth*, Mar 2021, <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/prophecy/prophecy-in-the-news/abraham->

¹⁷ Tyler Kotler, "Israel-Saudi Arabia Relations in Focus," *Honest Reporting*, Jun 16, 2019, <https://honestreporting.com/israel-saudi-arabiarelations/> (accessed Mar 3, 2021).

¹⁸ Warrant P. Strobel, "Biden launches fresh effort to end civil war in Yemen, halting 'offensive' aid to Saudis, naming envoy," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb 4, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-to-name-special-envoy-to-yemen-launching-fresh-effort-to-end-the-fighting-11612450815> (accessed Mar 16, 2021).

¹⁹ Jennifer Hansler, "Blinken removing Yemen's Houthis from list of foreign terrorist organizations effective next week," *CNN*, Feb 12, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/12/politics/blinken-fto-designation-reversal/index.html> (accessed Mar 22, 2021). ²⁰ Elad Benari, "Saudi King: No normalization with Israel without Palestinian state," *IsraelNationalNews.com*, Sep 7, 2020, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/286717> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

everyone and to have normal relations." ¹² Through this statement, MBS does not appear to oppose the development of relations with Israel, but without a proper resolution of the Palestinian cause, nothing fundamental will happen in that relationship.

Currently Disputes remain within KSA over the normalization of relations with Israel. Conservatives (led by King Salman) refuse to accept normalization unless the Palestinian question is properly resolved, while the liberal party (led by the Crown Prince) would not oppose some cooperation. Careful observation reveals there is no material dispute between KSA and Israel. Relations with Israel are likely to be improved, but currently only at the trade-based level. At present, no deeper connection between the two nations is likely, as normalization with Israel is a very difficult step, especially for the people of KSA. It is also difficult given the major role of KSA within the Muslim community in the region and the world. The Orthodox elements of the Saudi religious establishment, which have weight in a predominantly conservative Saudi society, strongly oppose peace with a Jewish state that excludes Palestinians and wrongly settles the fate of Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam. ¹³ For these reasons, a certain restraint in such an important decision, which could affect the situation not only in the kingdom, but also in the entire Muslim world, is understandable.

In particular, MBS, must be careful in his decision and consider the above-mentioned elements. The Crown Prince has so far successfully led the country through transformation of his 2030 initiative to diversify the country's economy. With normalization of Israel ties, some influential sheikhs and spiritual leaders may find the new KSA-Israel relationship undesirable. Even a few Al Qaeda groups still exist in KSA and they are likely to react after normalization. ¹⁴ Finally, Iran and Turkey will both strongly question KSA's global Muslim leadership should normalization occur.

Nevertheless, there are certain signs in that the Kingdom's leadership is slowly and carefully preparing the population for this step. Some view the Crown Prince's alleged secret meeting with the Prime Minister of Israel ¹⁵ as possible progress in KSA-Israel relations proceeding towards normalization. Moreover, the Imam of the Grand Mosque delivered a special prayer. He encouraged kindness and dialogue with non-Muslims and specifically referred to Jews. ¹⁶ Permission for Israeli planes to fly in Saudi airspace has been given by Saudi officials. Some

¹² Reuters Staff, "Saudi crown prince says Israelis have right to their own land," *Reuters*, Apr 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-israel-idUSKCN1H91SQ> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

¹³ Bilal Y. Saab, "The politics of Saudi normalization with Israel: ANALYSIS," *ABC News*, Oct 1, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/enus/news/world/the-politics-of-saudi-normalization-with-israel-analysis/ar-BB19Bdfc> (accessed Mar 31, 2021).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dan Williams, "Netanyahu held secret meeting with MBS, Mike Pompeo in Saudi Arabia on Sunday: report," *Reuters*, Nov 23, 2021, <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/netanyahu-held-secret-meeting-with-mbs-mike-pompeo-in-saudi-arabia-on-sunday-report> (accessed Mar 23, 2021).

¹⁶ Rayhan Uddin, "Mecca sermon raises questions on possible Saudi normalization with Israel," *Middle East Eye*, Sep 6, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-israel-normalisation-mecca-sermon-sudais> (accessed Mar 23, 2021). ²⁶ JNS

offensive passages, especially against Jews, have been removed from educational documents in KSA schools, but Israel still does not appear on maps in KSA.²⁶ However, normalization of relations with the Jewish state of Israel is viewed as immoral in parts of the Arab world. It is difficult to estimate how the Saudi population will react, and leaders must surely keep in mind that both Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Jordan's King Abdullah I, paid with their lives for their pragmatic openness to the Jewish state.¹⁷

The biggest driving force for normalizing relations is, of course, the common fear of Iran's actions.¹⁸ Iran is not slowing its proxy wars.¹⁹ In the case of the Houthis, after the aforementioned removal from the FTO list, they have intensified attacks towards KSA. Iran has also increased its uranium enrichment activity to obtain enough to build a nuclear warhead. Iran is most likely trying to get the best possible negotiating position, before returning to a nuclear agreement with the new US administration.²⁰ However, for the neighboring countries in the Middle East, this means increased risk and defensive measures against Iran are needed.

KSA in particular is now feeling strong pressure from the Houthis. The Houthis have even increased their activity by attacking civilian soft targets like International Airports, highly populated city areas, and public industries in the Kingdom. According to some analysts, the Houthis have become the only rebel group in the Middle East that can effectively use fixed-wing drones and ballistic missiles.²¹ The range and size of various Iranian supplied drones make elimination a very difficult task.²² The success of Saudi air defenses in countering these attacks is high, yet it is not 100%, and it is only a matter of time before a tragic event occurs. For this reason, KSA must act quickly. Israel's Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) technology is considered one of the best in the world, and normalization can provide the opening for KSA to purchase that technology, and better protect its population. Following the 2020 Abraham Accords, Israel approved potential Iron Dome deployments on US Gulf bases.²³ Thus, signing a normalization agreement with Israel could help KSA obtain this asset, considering that Israel has previously refused such a purchase.

According to recent reports, KSA has offered the Houthis a peace deal. The Saudi proposal calls for a nationwide ceasefire and reopening the airport in Yemen's capital. However, the Houthis said that the offer from KSA was not

Staff, "ZOA urges Saudi government to include Israel on official maps," *Jewish News Syndicate*, Nov 25, 2020 <https://www.jns.org/zoa-urges-saudi-government-to-include-israel-on-official-maps/> (accessed Mar 23, 2021).

¹⁷ Johannes Gerloff, "IZRAEL: Normalizace vztahů se SAE," (ISRAEL: The normalization of ties with UAE), *Neviditelný pes*, Oct 1, 2020, https://neviditelnypes.lidovky.cz/zahranici/izrael-normalizace-vztahu-se-sae.A200929_220031_p_zahranici_wag (accessed Mar 26, 2021).

¹⁸ Khaled Abu Toameh, "Arabs: A Warning to Biden about Iran's Mullahs," *Shabtabnews*, Mar 25, 2021, <https://english.shabtabnews.com/2021/03/25/arabs-a-warning-to-biden-about-irans-mullahs/> (accessed Mar 31, 2021).

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Mar 11, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

²⁰ David Axe, "Iran Is Close To Getting An Atomic Bomb—But It Could Still Choose To Stop," *Forbes*, Feb 9, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/02/09/iran-is-close-to-getting-an-atomic-bomb-but-it-could-still-choose-notto/?sh=6eb3462d565f> (accessed Mar 23, 2021).

²¹ Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi and Michael Georgy, "Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war," *Reuters*, Mar 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sourcesidUSKBN16S22R> (accessed Mar 15, 2021).

²² Seth J. Frantzman, "Houthis step up attacks after removal from 'terror' list," *Jerusalem Post*, Feb 15, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/houthis-step-up-attacks-after-new-terrorist-designation-659019> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

²³ Seth J. Frantzman, "Will the US deploy Iron Dome to protect bases in the Gulf?," *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan 24, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/will-us-deploy-iron-dome-to-protect-bases-in-the-gulf-656516> (accessed Mar 13, 2021).

sufficient.²⁴ This offer of peace will likely be followed by a series of negotiations for concessions. Given that the Houthis are backed by Iran, who is not interested in peace, stakeholders cannot expect such a peace agreement to be achieved in the near future. Although it is unlikely that this peace deal will be concluded soon or at all, the impact on the normalization of ties between Israel and KSA needs to be considered as well. Perhaps this peace agreement is the last resort before normalization of relations with Israel itself.

Conclusion

The Abraham Accords will bring an end to Middle East conflicts. Without a peace treaty between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, the Accords may undermine the prospect of resolving the Palestinian cause. It could intensify radicalization of Palestinians, and those who feel the Accords are a betrayal by the Arab countries.

The normalization of relations with Israel could also widen the gap between politicians and the people of the Arab world. Public opinion was more or less anti-Israel, and any rapid change may foster mistrust in at the community level.²⁵ Thus, if KSA truly insists on an acceptable peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Kingdom could indeed become the last Arab country to join the Abraham Accords and normalize ties.²⁶

Recommendations for US/CENTCOM

- Express full support to KSA to further proceed with a peace deal with the Houthis to stop war in Yemen.
- Support an effort by KSA to acquire Israeli air defense assets.
- Reassure KSA of the strategic US-KSA relationship while diplomatically advancing future KSA-Israel normalization.

²⁴ Trey Yingst and Yonat Friling, "Saudi Arabia to offer Houthis new ceasefire," *Fox News*, Mar 23, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/saudi-arabia-to-offer-houthis-new-ceasefire> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

²⁵ Marek Bláha, "Otevírá se cesta k míru na Blízkém východě? Politolog krotí optimismus," (*Is the way to peace in the Middle East open? A political scientist tames optimism*), *Euroz Pravy*, Sep 23, 2020, <https://eurozpravky.cz/zahranicni/blizky-vychod/otevira-se-cesta-k-miruna-blizkem-vychode-politolog-kroti-optimismus.92ec4d61/> (accessed Mar 25, 2021).

²⁶ i24News-AFP, "Normalization with Israel would bring 'tremendous benefit,' Saudi FM says," *i24News*, Apr 2, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1617383891-normalization-with-israel-would-bring-tremendous-benefitsaudi-fm-says> (accessed Apr 5, 2021).