



The Limits of Israel-Saudi Rapprochement

April 1, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman** *AFPC Insights*

Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Warfare; Israel; Middle East; Saudi Arabia

Is a political thaw between Jerusalem and Riyadh truly possible? Before the terror attacks of October 7th, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was widely hailed by many – including many in Israel – as the next likely entrant into the Abraham Accords, joining Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco in normalizing relations with the Jewish state.

Even now, amid Israel's ongoing war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, many still believe that the nascent reconciliation could be easily and quickly revived. In his recent address at New York's Radio City Music Hall, President Biden himself said as much when he suggested that the House of Saud, and other Arab governments as well, "are prepared to fully recognize Israel" if the Israeli government makes greater accommodations for humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians, and paves the way to an eventual two-state solution.

Others, however, are striking a more sober note. For instance, a new policy paper from the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Israel's premier think tank, suggests that – for all of the official optimism that surrounds it – Israeli-Saudi normalization could end up being a decidedly uphill battle.

"Polls conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy since the Abraham Accords in 2020 found that 40% of Saudis supported economic ties with Israel if they proved beneficial to the local economy," it notes. "This figure, although a minority, indicates an exceptional openness to entertain pragmatic relations with Israel."

However, Israel's current war appears to have fundamentally upended those perceptions. "In Nov.-Dec. 2023, support for any form of relations with Israel dropped to 20%, and 96% of Saudis favored the immediate cessation of ties between the Arab states and Israel in response to its actions in Gaza," it lays out.

Moreover, in contrast to the ruling House of Saud, the majority of Saudis appear to view the Kingdom's longtime regional rival Iran – rather than Israel – as a more natural ally. "Only 20% of Saudis expressed support for their government's cooperation with Israel against Iran, while only a slim majority of 60% of Saudis even viewed Tehran as a rival after the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation in March 2023," the study details.

What does all this mean? "Despite an obvious shift in the discourse on relations with Israel within the Saudi kingdom, hostility to Israel and aversion to the idea of relations with it are firmly rooted among the general public, leaving a clear gap between the positions of the populace and the government," the paper concludes. As such, "[n]ormalization of relations with Israel will be an unpopular move among the Saudis."

Which isn't to say that it's impossible. After all, the Abraham Accords materialized precisely because they codified trends that had been percolating quietly throughout the Middle East for years. Strategically, Israel and the Gulf states had long shared deep concerns about Iran's destabilizing regional behavior and stubborn nuclear ambitions. Economically, Israel and countries like the United Arab Emirates were already quietly engaged in limited but lucrative trade across a variety of sectors. And socio-culturally, connections (like those between Morocco and its extensive Diaspora in Israel) made expanded tourism and people-to-people contacts supremely sensible.

All of those factors are still deeply relevant, which helps to explain why those governments – for all their misgivings about Israel's current military campaign, and their sensitivity to the plight of the Palestinians – give every indication that they remain committed to getting the Accords back on track. Those same priorities also make normalization with Israel a logical decision for the Kingdom, which over the past several years has embraced a new economic and political vision that prioritizes greater innovation, foreign investment and societal change.

For their part, Saudi rulers are well aware of the potential benefits that deeper interplay with Israel could bring. The Saudi people, however, aren't nearly as well versed. It stands to reason that the sooner the House of Saud launches a serious campaign to convince its own subjects rapprochement with Israel is in their long term interest, the better off the Kingdom will be.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.