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THE LIMITS OF ISRAELI-SAUDI RAPPROCHEMENT

Is a political thaw between Jerusalem and Riyadh truly possible? Before the terror attack 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," where it would join Bahrain, the UAE and Morocco in a normalization of relations with the Jewish state. Indeed, earlier in 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself had waxed optimistic that normalization with Saudi Arabia was simply a matter of time. And even now, amid Israel's ongoing war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, many there believe that the budding reconciliation between Jerusalem and Riyadh could be easily and quickly revived. A new policy paper, however, has suggested that doing so could end up being a decidedly uphill climb.

"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," writes researcher Ilan Zelayat in an analysis for the Institute for National Security Studies, Israel's premier think tank. "This figure, although a minority, indicates an exceptional openness to entertain pragmatic relations with Israel." However, Israel's current war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip 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," Zelayat notes.

Moreover, in contrast to the ruling House of Saud, the majority of Saudi citizens still appear to view regional rival Iran – rather than Israel – as the Kingdom's 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," Zelayat notes.

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," Zelayat concludes. As such, "[n]ormalization of relations with Israel will be an unpopular move among the Saudis." (INSS, March 18, 2024)

"PAY TO SLAY," REBOOTED

When it comes to the conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Biden administration is increasingly thinking about the "day after," and what sort of political order might prevail in the Gaza Strip following the end of Israel's current campaign there. But its preferred solution – empowering the Palestinian Authority to take charge of the territory – could end up incentivizing more Palestinian extremism. To wit, the White House is now pledging \$97 million a year to the Palestinian Authority in hopes of "revamping" its governance, but has as yet made no public demand for it to terminate "pay for slay," its policy of providing economic benefits to the families of extremists who carry out acts of terrorism against Israel.

Indeed, despite economic disruptions caused by the current war, the PA reportedly is still planning to allocate "more than \$218 million in new expenses for 'martyrs' and prisoners over the next year." As a result, observers are warning, U.S. funds are likely to end up being used to pay terrorists and their beneficiaries, rather than helping to ameliorate the worst economic contraction in the Palestinian Territories since the second *intifada*. (*Washington Free Beacon*, March 4, 2024)

AN INFLECTION POINT FOR AQAP

Al-Qaeda's Persian Gulf franchise, known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), is experiencing something of a renaissance. The group has recently had a media resurgence and intensified its military operations, capitalizing on spreading regional disorder in the wake of the October 7th attacks. A recent UN report states that "AQAP remains the most effective terrorist group in Yemen with intent to conduct operations in the region and beyond."

This revival, however, has been complicated by the sudden death of the group's leader, Khalid Batarfi. Little is known about Batarfi's demise, but the group has already appointed his replacement: Sa'ad bin Atef Al-Awlaki, a member of its *shura* council. Al-Awlaki is well known to U.S. counterterrorism specialists, both as a result of his role as Batarfi's deputy in recent years and because of his prior function as AQAP's leader for Yemen's Abyan Governorate, and he currently has a \$6 million bounty on his head.

The leadership change has potentially significant implications for the group's overall direction. Allegedly, Batarfi and Al-Awlaki had differing opinions on AQAP's strategy not to attack Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who have been a significant enemy of al-Qaeda for years – with Al-Awlaki arguing in favor of making them a target of AQAP operations. As such, analysts speculate that the group's "calculus" toward the Houthis might change now that he is in charge. (*Long War Journal*, March 11, 2024)