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Determinants of Saudi Arabia's Response to the Gaza War

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Following Hamas's "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" on October 7, Saudi Arabia publicly criticized¹ Israel's actions in Gaza and blamed it for escalating tensions, despite talks to normalize relations between the two countries. Notably, Saudi Arabia refrained² from condemning the Hamas operation. Condemnation of Israel's actions continued as Saudi Arabia hosted³ the Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit that formed a ministerial committee to lead international efforts aimed at ending the Gaza war. Since the beginning of the war, Saudi Arabia consistently stressed its support for a two-state solution, a position that was recently affirmed⁴ in a Ministerial Committee meeting with representatives of the European Union and Arab and other countries in Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia's significance as a leader and economic powerhouse in the Arab world and the region influenced its stance. However, it did not exert pressure on the United States and Western nations to end the war, nor did it announce a clear halt in the normalization process with Israel. Instead, it sought to revitalize negotiations with Israel while increasing its focus on prioritizing the Palestinian component of any possible peace deal following the Gaza war.

In navigating its position, Saudi Arabia carefully considers its important role, the attitudes of its citizens and the broader Arab world's views on Gaza, as well as its strategic and economic interests.

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Safeguarding Saudi Nationalism

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has experienced substantial changes, including moving away from the Salafi-Wahhabi religious doctrine that once defined its legitimacy. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has acknowledged⁶ missteps in embracing Salafist Islam in response to the Iranian revolution, and is now emphasizing "Saudi nationalism" as a replacement⁷ to the country's religious identity. The new identity has been prominently promoted through both traditional outlets and social media by pro-government figures.

1 "Foreign Ministry KSA," X, 7/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/6er2V7HD>

2 Barak Ravid, "Hamas Attack Delivers Major Blow to Biden's Push for Saudi-Israel Normalization," *AXIOS*, 8/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/ier21sEN>

3 "Joint Arab-Islamic Summit-Commissioned Ministerial Committee Meets United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner," Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 13/12/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/5er208Bf>

4 "Riyadh Co-Chair Statement on Efforts to Implement the Two-state Solution, including the Recognition of the Palestinian State," *Saudi Press Agency*, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Wer23FEi>

5 Tobias Borck, "Kingdom of Change: Saudi Arabia's Evolving Foreign Policy," *RUSI*, 5/6/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Mer24Xhq>

6 Ahmed Nagi, "Saudi Arabia's Split-Image Approach to Salafism," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 13/9/2022, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/3er27med>

7 Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia's New Nationalism," *Project Syndicate*, 29/9/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ker9qiHK>



Saudi nationalism today revolves around a shared loyalty to the Al Saud political leadership and pride in the nation's economic progress and social reforms, epitomized by Vision 2030.⁸ The core of this identity lies in the principle of "Saudi First"⁹, which seeks to distinguish the Saudi the Kingdom from neighboring Arab peoples, while rejecting transnational ideologies, particularly Salafist and political Islam represented by Wahhabism and groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.

Supporters of Saudi nationalism aim to unite the nation under an identity overcoming historical influences of Arabism and Islamic ideologies. The focus is on giving greater importance to domestic affairs rather than regional concerns and withdrawing from issues that have traditionally been significant for Saudis, like the Palestinian cause. It is interesting to note the rise of hashtags like "Palestine is not my cause"¹⁰ on X (previously Twitter) after the announcement of the Abraham Accords¹¹ that normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. These hashtags highlight the idea that each country should prioritize its interests separately from issues related to Palestine.

Moreover, Palestinians were seen as responsible for their hardships, with claims that Saudi Arabia had tried everything to solve the problem, but Palestinian leaders did not take advantage of available opportunities. The former Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Bandar bin Sultan, articulated this perspective¹² in a three-part TV series on Al-Arabiya channel by pointing out instances where the Palestinian leadership purportedly missed out on solutions.

After October 7, supporters of Saudi nationalism encountered a significant challenge. A large portion of Saudi society echoing sentiments¹³ seen across the world showed deep sympathy with the suffering of the people of Gaza.

However, after October 7, supporters of Saudi nationalism encountered a significant challenge. A large portion of Saudi society echoing sentiments¹⁴ seen across the world showed deep sympathy with the suffering of the people of Gaza. Concerns by authorities arose about a resurgence of transnational identities, especially with militant Islamist groups involved in the conflict with Israel, which could serve as attractive models for Saudi potential sympathizers. Furthermore, fears emerged about the radicalization¹⁵ of the youth in response to perceived Israeli aggression in Gaza, which could potentially strengthen extremist jihadist groups.

⁸ *Saudi Vision 2030*, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Yer9wTu6>

⁹ Eman Alhussein, "Saudi First: How hyper-nationalism is transforming Saudi Arabia," European Council on Foreign Relations, 19/6/2019, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/yer9rsWj>

¹⁰ "Saudi activists accused of launching hashtag 'Palestine is not my cause'," *Middle East Monitor*, 23/4/2020, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/wer9t2TD>

¹¹ "The Abraham Accords Declaration," U.S Department of State, accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/ter9yIDZ>

¹² "Full transcript: Prince Bandar bin Sultan's interview on Israel-Palestine conflict," *Alarabiya News*, 7/10/2020, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/wer9iKSN>

¹³ "Arab Public Opinion about Israel's War on Gaza," Arab Center Washington DC, 8/2/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/3er9ohCe>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "What Worries Me About the Gaza War After My Trip to Arab States," *The New York Times*, 12/12/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/cer9sbXX>



Saudi officials emphasized¹⁶ their unwavering opposition to aggression and their support for a two-state solution, while also setting the tone for Saudi sympathy toward Gaza. Although voices condemning Israeli aggression and expressing solidarity with Gaza were not entirely suppressed, measures were taken to prevent the mobilization of sentiments that could strengthen transnational identities.

Reports emerged of limitations¹⁷ on public demonstrations in support of Gaza in Saudi Arabia, which include apparent bans on wearing clothing referencing Gaza and the Palestinian cause, as well as arrests¹⁸ of social media users who show sympathy for Gaza. Limits were imposed on expressions of sympathy in entertainment contexts to prevent the dissemination of political messages to a youthful audience. A photograph posted¹⁹ on X of an Al-Hilal Football Club player wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh was removed, and those who shared issued apologies for inadvertently intertwining sports with politics. It is worth mentioning that the percentage of Saudis who refuse to recognize Israel has risen from 38% in 2022 to 68% in 2023, following the war on Gaza, according to the Arab Index.²⁰

In addition, the Riyadh Season²¹ of entertainment carried on with its events and concerts featuring Saudi, Arab, and international celebrities, with minimal mention of the Gaza war. Keeping the Riyadh Season running was seen as important to underscore the primacy of national interests and development projects aligning with the country's goal of diversifying revenue sources.

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The revival of the national identity, under the "Saudi First" slogan was accompanied by increased criticism of Islamist movements and the idea of Islamic internationalism, which was disseminated through Saudi media and pro-government social media accounts. Saudi newspapers prominently featured articles²² condemning Hamas and its operation on October 7, portraying it as an instrument of Iranian influence in the region.

16 R. Clarke Cooper, "The future of Saudi-Israeli relations is a balancing act between Palestinian and regional interests," *Atlantic Council*, 22/2/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ner9dOH0>

17 "Saudi Arabia's Israel Strategy Upended by Anger Over Gaza War," *Financial Times*, 30/3/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, accessed on 28/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/7er9zR3p>

18 "Saudi Arabia Steps Up Arrests Of Those Attacking Israel Online," *Bloomberg*, 2/5/2024, accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Jer9xJbx>

19 "Saudi Football Club Deletes Tweet Expressing Solidarity with Gaza," *Middle East Monitor*, 23/10/2023, accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ter9cdBJ>

20 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *Arab Public Opinion About the Israeli War on Gaza* (Doha: 2024), accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Zer9nGPT>

21 "The Internet Criticises Saudi Arabia's Riyadh Season Amidst the Israel-Palestine War: 'So Disappointing'," *Mashable Middle East*, 30/10/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ber9meHX>

22 Elie Podeh & Elad Giladi, "Is Hamas losing the media battle to Israel in the Arab press? – opinion," *The Jerusalem Post*, 9/11/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/3er9EStr>



Mitigating Conflict Escalation

Saudi Arabia's drive to diversify its economy has emerged as a pivotal factor shaping its foreign policy decisions. The endeavors to address the Yemen war, seek reconciliation with Iran and Turkey, and alleviate regional issues all correspond to the objective of fostering a favorable climate for Saudi economic diversification ambitions. With a focus on ensuring the success of its economic initiatives, Saudi Arabia aims to steer clear of regional tensions. The Gaza war makes this more difficult, leading the kingdom to emphasize a strategy of de-escalation and preventing expansion of the conflict in the region.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has strategically invested in western companies, like Lucid²³ and BlackRock²⁴, through the Public Investment Fund. Amidst the Gaza war, this investment strategy demonstrated by the Public Investment Fund acquiring²⁵ a 10% share in the holding company of Heathrow Airport in London. This move highlights Saudi Arabia's dedication to its investment goals regardless of the war, refraining from leveraging the issue as a bargaining tool to stop the war.

Saudi Arabia's goal of attracting investments for mega-projects like NEOM has led it to downplay the impact of the war on this path. On October 20, Saudi Arabia proceeded with hosting²⁶ the "Future Investment Initiative" forum in Riyadh as planned, bringing together 5,000 participants from 90 countries to signal the war's insignificance to the forum's objectives and attraction of foreign investments. Furthermore, the late-October Saudi-EU Investment Forum highlighted the connections²⁷ between Saudi Arabia and European Union nations, confirming Riyadh's commitment to building partnerships with EU countries.

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By positioning itself as a business hub and a host of major international events, such as securing rights for hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2034²⁸ and Expo in 2030²⁹, Saudi Arabia underscores its economic priorities and how they influence its approach towards the Gaza conflict. This shows that safeguarding interests from any effects of the conflict is crucial, for its economic ambitions. Saudi Arabia's main goal is to prevent any escalation of conflicts in the region and to avoid confrontations³⁰ with Iran and its allies.

23 Chester Dawson & Edward Ludlow, "EV Maker Lucid Surges on \$1 Billion Lifeline From Saudi Investor," *Bloomberg*, 25/3/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/der9RzdW>

24 "BlackRock, Saudi Sovereign Wealth Fund to Launch Riyadh-Based Investment Firm," *WSJ*, 30/4/2024, accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Fer9IASJ>

25 "Saudi Investment Fund to Buy 10% Stake in Heathrow Airport," *BBC*, 29/11/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Cer9OcMa>

26 "5,000 Participants from 90 Countries to Join 'FI' Forum in Riyadh," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 20/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Jer9POc5>

27 "Saudi Arabia planning to invest \$427bn through partnerships: Minister," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 23/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/rer9P3OO>

28 "Saudi Arabia Launches Uncontested 2034 FIFA World Cup Bid," *ESPN*, 1/3/2024, accessed on 18/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/2er9Gxsp>

29 "Expo 2030 Riyadh," *Bureau International des Expositions*, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/7er9HrDE>

30 David Ottaway, "Saudi-Iranian Relations Restored But Remain Tense," *Wilson Center*, 9/3/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/der9LSAI>



The way Saudi Arabia has engaged with Iran during the Gaza war seems to be aimed at reducing tensions in the region. Reports indicate that Saudi Arabia made offers³¹ to invest in Iran on the condition that Iran restrains its allies and stops them from escalating the Gaza conflict into a larger regional war. Moreover, Saudi Arabia chose not to join³² Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US-led coalition that was formed to deter attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group in Yemen. This decision underscores Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to get involved in regional disputes. This reticence predated the Gaza conflict, with prior efforts³³ focused on seeking a political settlement to the Yemeni conflict.

Saudi Arabia is keen to avoid the political and security consequences of the Gaza crisis on the region. Saudi Arabia is worried that long-lasting conflicts could lead to security instability in nearby nations or trigger new waves of popular upheavals similar to the Arab Spring, especially in Jordan and Egypt. The surge in protests in Jordan in late March, reinforced by large demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy in Amman, intensified Saudi concerns about the possible consequences.

In response, MBS reached out³⁴ to King Abdullah II of Jordan, expressing solidarity and endorsing actions to strengthen Jordan's security and stability. A media campaign was launched to defend Jordan³⁵, emphasizing its security as a "red line" for Saudi Arabia. This campaign attributed the protests³⁶ to the Muslim Brotherhood, allegedly supported by Iran, reflecting fears of a resurgence of the organization and its destabilizing impact on Arab regimes in the wake of the Gaza conflict.

Commitment to Normalization Efforts

After the onset of the Gaza war, there were reports suggesting that Saudi Arabia had paused discussions³⁷ on normalization with Israel. Despite challenges anticipated in resuming normalization talks during the conflict, the United States remained dedicated to keeping normalization opportunities open. Visits³⁸ by US officials and Congressmen to Riyadh in the first few weeks of the war were aimed at maintaining momentum for normalization amidst the Gaza war. Discussions regarding normalization resurfaced, with Saudi Arabia requiring the path to normalization to include progress³⁹

31 "Saudi Arabia Offers Iran Investment to Blunt Gaza War," *Bloomberg*, 29/11/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/2er9Xlp8>

32 "Hoping for Peace With Houthis, Saudis Keep Low Profile in Red Sea Conflict," *The New York Times*, 25/12/202, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/per9V4gO>

33 Ahmed Nagi, "Catching Up on the Back-channel Peace Talks in Yemen," *International Crisis Group*, 10/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/0er9B5Vp>

34 "Saudi Crown Prince backs Jordan's security measures in phone call with King Abdullah," *Saudi Gazette*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/ker9NJxo>

35 Abdulaziz Sager, "Concerns Over Jordan's Stability — the View from Riyadh," *Arab News*, 3/4/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ser90GVG>

36 "Who benefits from destabilizing Jordan's security?" *Arab News*, 2/4/2024, accessed 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Eer98ayq>

37 "Saudi Arabia Pauses Normalisation Talks with Israel Amid Ongoing War with Hamas," *France 24*, 14/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/yer98GCR>

38 "US Senators to Travel to Israel, Saudi Arabia to Push Deal," *Reuters*, 15/10/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Her94SBh>

39 "Saudi Arabia: No Israel Ties without Recognition of Palestinian State," *Reuters*, 7/2/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/ner97tcl>



towards a Palestinian state. Secretary of State Blinken's visit to Riyadh in late April showed⁴⁰ the US-Saudi part of the normalization deal is close to be reached.

Despite challenges anticipated in resuming normalization talks during the conflict, the United States remained dedicated to keeping normalization opportunities open.

For Saudi Arabia, the normalization deal serves as a means to bolster ties with the United States and secure defense assurances. Saudi Arabia is actively pursuing⁴¹ a military pact with the United States to ensure support in the case of an attack. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is seeking access to advanced weapons, building a nuclear reactor for peaceful purposes, and collaborating with the US on technology and artificial intelligence. Normalization acts as a conduit to deepen relations with Washington, with many Arab states viewing it as an opportunity to leverage Israeli influence in Washington to secure gains from the United States.

Despite the Gaza war, Saudi Arabia remains committed to normalization efforts, prioritizing the negotiation of a defense treaty with the United States during President Biden's tenure. However, leaked reports of a Plan B,⁴² suggesting approval of a Saudi-U.S. defense pact even without current normalization with Israel, signal Saudi Arabia's urgency to finalize the agreement. Yet, such a move lacks the historical significance desired by the Biden administration and may face challenges gaining Congressional approval without Israeli normalization.

Although Saudi Arabia has had some interactions with Israel like hosting⁴³ officials and investing in⁴⁴ Israeli companies, these efforts fall short of the comprehensive normalization desired by all parties involved. The proposed normalization implies a security and economic partnership that aimed at fostering a regional alliance. Saudi Arabia acknowledges the advantages of such an alliance in military and security aspects and is committed to exploring these possibilities further.

Diplomatic Achievement

Saudi Arabia views the prolongation of Gaza war as heightening the risks it seeks to avoid, such as potential intensification of hostilities, negative impacts on its economic interests, the rise of extreme ideologies among young Saudis and Arabs, and the challenges in negotiations with the United States for security assurances and a defense treaty. As a result, Saudi Arabia is leaning towards actions to stop the war and create an environment conducive to reaching a resolution, with the normalization deal playing a crucial role in this process.

⁴⁰ "Blinken Says US Almost Ready with Saudi Rewards for Israel Normalization," *Frace 24*, 29/4/2024 accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ker96Qec>

⁴¹ "US and Saudis Near Defense Pact Meant to Reshape Middle East," *Bloomberg*, 1/5/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Per3qdk2>

⁴² "Saudis Push for 'Plan B' that Excludes Israel from Key Deal with US," *Guardian*, 1/5/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/oer3qF0M>

⁴³ "Israeli Minister Arrives in Saudi Arabia in First Public Visit," *Aljazeera*, 26/9/2023, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/0er3wfxq>

⁴⁴ "Kushner's Saudi-Backed Affinity to Acquire Stake in Israeli Firm," *Bloomberg*, 6/9/2023333, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ger3eH05>



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This stance enables Saudi Arabia to position normalization as a constructive element in addressing the conflict, portraying it as a diplomatic achievement that contributes to easing the plight of Palestinians and promoting comprehensive solutions to the Palestinian issue, albeit over a protracted timeline, underpinned by the two-state solution.

By showcasing normalization as part of the solution, Saudi Arabia seeks to project a positive image of its efforts to the Arab and Islamic world. Some American commentators⁴⁵ have suggested Saudi Arabia's potential role as a peace broker in the conflict, contingent upon the extent to which the normalization deal addresses the Palestinian issue, which largely relies on the concessions made by Israel's right-wing government under Benjamin Netanyahu leadership.

45 "Only Biden and M.B.S. Can Redirect the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," 13/2/2024, accessed on 19/5/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/wer3ruPZ>