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Exaggerations, Obstacles and Opportunities: The Saudi Arabian Position in the Gaza War*

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This paper aims to shed light on the obstacles and opportunities of Saudi involvement in a future Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It first explains the enigmatic nature of Saudi communication towards Israel and explains why Saudi pragmatism has been misunderstood. The paper also explains the rationale behind Saudi Arabia's willingness to normalize relations with Israel, and that Saudi-Israeli normalization is treated as a gateway to a larger game-changing strategic treaty with the United States, rather than a keenness to cooperate with Israel itself. In addition, the paper argues that while the Saudi ruling elite are willing to play financial and security roles in "reconstructing" Gaza, it is unforeseeable that this will ensue without a credible peace process that can justify these efforts, especially against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's restructuring of its own economy. The paper then explains the ways in which Saudi Arabia, Gulf Arab states, and European states can help cooperate in areas such as building a Palestinian economic horizon that can strengthen the Palestinian-Israeli political framework; developing Palestinian-Israeli green cooperation; and developing an Arab-Israeli network of academics, experts, and journalists that can be an intersection of top-down and bottom-up projects that aim to reach a two-state solution.

A. Triangulation of Saudi-US-Israeli Discourses

There has always been a real desire by many analysts, diplomats, and politicians to know more about Saudi Arabia and the Saudi rationale. Ascertaining what its real positions are,

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especially towards its position on the Palestinian-Israeli question, has been an incredibly elusive process. Perhaps explaining the nature of the Saudi-Israeli relationship will help navigate through this foggy process. It would be misleading to assume the Saudi-Israeli relationship is purely bilateral, and it would equally be an exaggeration to see it as merely a file within the Saudi-American relationship. Instead, one can claim that it is a trilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia, the US, and Israel. This means that Saudi discourse towards Israel, pertaining to peace and normalization, cannot be separated from Saudi Arabia's calculations with the US. This dynamic strikes at the heart of why communication is not direct – hence the foggy process around ascertaining what the Saudi position is. What exacerbates the confusion is the immense amount of politicization of the Saudi-Israeli relationship in both Tel Aviv and Washington D.C.

In Israel, the current government has been politicizing its proclaimed relations with Saudi Arabia in the hope of alleviating political pressure and framing Saudi normalization within a “peace for peace” paradigm.¹ In the US – as part of the Biden Doctrine² – Saudi-Israeli normalization is apparently the only clear Middle East strategy that the administration has. Therefore, the Biden Administration has been suggesting that they are on the cusp of achieving a major breakthrough – one can call this a process of strategic speculation.³ What also enables this foggy process is Saudi pragmatism, which attempts to balance its historic position towards the Palestinian issue with its interests pertaining to the US and Israel.

Historically, the Saudi ruling elite have managed to strike a pragmatic balance between communicating their willingness to develop relations with Israel and adhering to their traditional pro-Palestinian stance. However, the Saudi position has been difficult to pinpoint due to the immense amount of misrepresentation of Saudi pragmatic statements. In other words, officials and journalists (especially in Israel) deliberately use parts of Saudi statements and responses to build a narrative that suggests a clearly different position than the Saudi ruling elite intended.

For example, in July of 2023, amid speculation of a potential Saudi-Israeli normalization deal, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Barbara Leaf, said regarding the potential of Saudi-Israeli normalization that there was “a lot of misreporting and hyperventilation in the press ... especially in the Israeli press.”⁴ Moreover, in February 2024, White House National Security Communications Advisor, John Kirby, was asked if Saudi-Israeli normalization was still on the table. He claimed that the normalization package,

¹ “[Ex-Israel PM: Peace deals with Arab states got Israel out of land-for-peace equation](#),” *Middle East Monitor*, 15 June 2021.

² Thomas L. Friedman, “[A Biden Doctrine for the Middle East Is Forming. And It’s Big](#),” *New York Times*, 31 January 2024.

³ Aziz Alghashian, “[Israeli Strategies to Preserve and Expand the Abraham Accords](#),” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 31 July 2023.

⁴ Ben Samuels, “[Top U.S. Diplomat Throws Cold Water on Israel-Saudi Normalization](#),” *Haaretz*, 31 May 2023.

entailing a Saudi-US treaty and Saudi-Israeli normalization, was on a separate track from the efforts to reach a ceasefire in Gaza. This statement invoked a strong rebuke from the Saudi foreign ministry, which explicitly named his position as misrepresenting the Saudi stance.⁵

That being said, the combination of Israeli and American respective politicization, along with Saudi Arabia's pragmatic language, creates an ecosystem of foggy surroundings surrounding the Saudi position. This is crucial to bear in mind when trying to understand what is said about Saudi commitments regarding the "day after" in Gaza and a future peace process.

B. Saudi-Israeli Normalization and the Palestinian Element

Currently, the war in Gaza is still raging. By the 24th of June 2024, the number of casualties had reached the grim milestone of over 38000,⁶ and unfortunately, the number is expected to increase. The Palestinian-Israeli political landscapes have rarely been this polarized, and the notion of peace talks can be considered as nothing but anathema.

On the regional and international levels, the Biden Administration and the Saudi ruling elite have been negotiating the grand bargain deal put forth by the Biden administration.⁷ This massive strategic deal entails an array of US strategic perks to Saudi Arabia, and in exchange, Saudi Arabia's normalization of relations with Israel. That said, the Saudi ruling elite have stated that there needed to be Israeli concessions to the Palestinians. The deal is cautiously considered a pathway out of the current tragic situation, leading to an eventual Palestinian-Israeli peace.

I would argue that if the deal does not contribute to a viable Palestinian state, Saudi-Israeli normalization may be a wasted opportunity that could otherwise be leveraged to support a genuine peace process.

There is currently a great deal of misunderstanding and foggy surroundings surrounding the potential Saudi-Israeli normalization deal, which is why it would be fruitful to map out the contours of the deal and highlight where the Palestinian element is positioned within this 'grand bargain.' The make-up of the deal is divided into two spheres: the security sphere and the diplomatic sphere:

The Security Sphere

⁵ Aziz Alghashian, "[What does Saudi Arabia's position on Palestinian state signal to US, Israel?](#)," *Al-Monitor*, 10 February 2024.

⁶ AJLabs, "[Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker](#)," *Aljazeera*, last modified 19 August 2024.

⁷ Edward Wong and Vivian Nereim, "[Israel Resists Grand Bargain as U.S. and Saudis Work on Security Pact](#)," *New York Times*, 17 May 2024.

The security aspect entails a series of strategic deals involving a US-Saudi defense treaty, nuclear cooperation to develop Saudi Arabia's nuclear capabilities, agreements expediting access to weapons sales, as well as economic and tech-centric strategic agreements. As of yet, the details of the security arrangement are still being negotiated, but an agreement is on the horizon. After the visit of Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in May 2024, the foreign ministry stated that they are at "[the semi-final version of the draft strategic agreements between the two countries, which are almost being finalized.](#)"⁸

What do the Saudis want and why? The Saudis want a binding defense treaty that can ensure a US commitment to Saudi security. Throughout the history of the Saudi-US relationship, tension, frustration, and strategic cooperation have been salient themes. Perhaps the most pertinent theme is anxiety – in particular, Saudi anxiety about a firm American commitment in the face of serious threats to Saudi security. There have been several precedents where Saudi Arabia was disappointed in the US' lack of commitment, chief among them being the attacks on [the Albugaig oil refineries](#), especially as the Saudis see themselves as the US' main partner in the region.

Normalization with Israel was seen as an opportunity to address this issue and secure a US commitment that is shielded from the whims of D.C. politics. What the Saudis initially hoped for was a NATO-like Article 5 commitment, where American forces would be obliged to defend Saudi Arabia. However, such a treaty is unlikely to materialize. Therefore, we can expect a treaty that balances a strong American commitment to assist Saudi Arabia with enough room for the Saudis to maneuver with China and other international actors. This treaty will most likely obligate the US to coordinate with Saudi forces rather than using force alongside them.

The Diplomatic Sphere

On the diplomatic front, the Saudi position has been historically consistent in principle. Ever since the 1967 war, when major Arab states became convinced that the Palestinian issue could only be resolved politically, the Saudi ruling elite have called, albeit quietly, for a two-state solution based on the borders of 1967. Regarding the specifics of the Palestinian-Israeli settlement, the Saudi ruling elite's position has been to accept what the Palestinians deem acceptable, making the Saudi stance somewhat flexible.

Even soon after the horrific October 7th attacks, the Saudi ruling elite have not ruled out normalization with Israel but have insisted on an irreversible and credible pathway to a two-state solution. The question is, what constitutes "credible" and "irreversible"? This is deliberately left to be negotiated. As a result, other aspects of the "day after" will also be subject to negotiation.

⁸ "[Saudi crown prince, US national security adviser meet on bilateral deal](#)," Reuters, 19 May 2024.

Given the unlikelihood of the Netanyahu-led government's commitment to a pathway toward a two-state solution, coupled with the continuation of the war and emotional trauma, Saudi-Israeli normalization currently seems rather unlikely. (Although it is difficult, a Saudi-Israeli normalization could still occur if the Israeli prime minister provides a statement indicating a commitment to a horizon towards a two-state solution and halts the war). That being said, it is worth shedding light on how the Saudi ruling elite view Israel within the ongoing negotiations.

Saudi Perception of Israel

Notwithstanding consistent Saudi condemnation of Israel, the Saudi ruling elite is still willing to normalize relations with Israel. Why? To assume this is due to a deep Saudi desire to cooperate with Israel is a mistake. Rather, the Saudi ruling elite have responded to the significant eagerness of both the Trump and Biden administrations to have Saudi Arabia normalize relations with Israel.

Given the lofty price the Saudi ruling elite is asking from the US, this suggests that Israel does not hold much weight in Saudi perception. The Saudi normalization with Israel is primarily motivated by the desire to gain strategic concessions from the US, rather than by the benefits of normalization with Israel itself. In other words, the Saudi ruling elite does not see enough strategic utility in Israel to warrant normalization that circumvents the Palestinian issue. This perspective was exacerbated by the Abraham Accords, as it gave new meaning to normalization with Israel. The proactive role the US played in incentivizing Arab states to usher in a new era of diplomatic relations with Israel effectively shifted the burden of concessions from Israel to the US. This, in essence, debunked the myth that Saudi Arabia would normalize relations with Israel without demanding significant concessions.

The second simplified notion regarding Saudi-Israeli normalization is that it would manifest due to their shared concern about the Iranian threat. Since the Arab Spring, the simplistic notion of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" has underpinned the rationale that Saudi Arabia and Israel would normalize relations because of the Iranian threat. However, the idea that Saudi Arabia would normalize relations with Israel solely due to this threat is misleading and grossly simplistic. Saudi Arabia and Israel have faced common threats since the infancy of their statehood, so the Iranian threat is not a new or unusual factor in their relationship.

Regarding Iran, the Saudi-Israeli alignment revolves around three common objectives. Firstly, it concerns the non-state pro-Iranian actors in the region. Whether it is Ansar Allah in Yemen (known as the Houthis) or Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Saudis, Israelis, and others in the region view these groups as sources of regional instability and high security threats. Secondly, both Saudi Arabia and Israel are aligned over the Iranian nuclear threat. This alignment is evident in their respective discourses of both Israel and Saudi Arabia over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015. Not only was the JCPOA

problematic due to its sunset clauses on weaponizing Iran's nuclear program,⁹ but the deal also enabled Iran to access funds that could fuel its networks of non-state actors. Thirdly, both Saudi Arabia and Israel have an interest in keeping the US involved in the region. Despite Saudi Arabia and Israel diversifying their relations with superpowers (especially in the case of Saudi Arabia, as can be illustrated by its joining BRICS and its strategic relations with both Russia and China), and the frustrations that can arise from their relations with the US, they both prefer to have the US as their main security guarantor.

On the other hand, while Saudi Arabia and Israel have converged in their threat perception of Iran, they diverge in their approaches to dealing with it. Israel has been advocating for a more confrontational approach. Among developing economic and cultural ties, one of Israel's aims in normalizing relations with Arab Gulf countries is to establish a security buffer between itself and Iran. Conversely, Saudi Arabia has sought to normalize relations with Iran in the hope of taming and co-opting it, while keeping it at bay. This reflects a fundamentally different approach that requires a careful balancing act. Therefore, their shared concern over Iran is not the main catalyst that would bring about Saudi-Israeli normalization.

Soft cooperation over Iran has taken place over the years, and Saudi-Israeli cooperation is best understood as a relationship in which the US acts as a harmonizer of this soft cooperation. However, if the Saudis are already able to achieve their interests through other means, there is less incentive to normalize relations with Israel. Hence, Saudi normalization with Israel is viewed primarily as an opportunity to secure strategic commitments from the US that could not otherwise be obtained.

C. Saudi Obstacles and Considerations for the “Day After” Effort

Soon after the current war in Gaza started, questions arose about who would fund the reconstruction of a devastated Gaza. Netanyahu very nonchalantly said in a television interview that the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia would play roles by financing the reconstruction of Gaza and providing security in the post war phase.¹⁰ Yet, the Israeli prime minister has severely underestimated the ease and eagerness with which Gulf states would commit to such a task. This is yet another reminder of how politicization is increasing the foginess regarding the role of Saudi Arabia and other GCC states in the “day after.” While the Saudi ruling elite have expressed their willingness to contribute to funding for the “day after” plan, several factors severely disincentivize Saudi funding.

Saudi Economic Factors

⁹ “[Explainer: Timing of Key Sunsets in Nuclear Deal](#),” *United States Institute of Peace*, 18 October 2023.

¹⁰ Phil McGraw, “[Dr. Phil's Exclusive Interview with Benjamin Netanyahu | Episode 221 | Phil in the Blanks Podcast](#),” *Phil in the Blanks*, 16 May 2024, video.

Anybody currently following Saudi Arabia cannot escape the presence of Saudi Vision 2030. A broad super umbrella of policies and strategies, Vision 2030 is designed to restructure and reorient the Saudi state. At the heart of this objective is a diversification of the economy to reduce dependence on oil. This goal is not cheap and necessitates a massive Saudi effort in reinvesting in its own economy. While the Saudi ruling elite do have money, it is primarily allocated to these reinvestment efforts. Currently, Saudi Arabia has embarked on initiating a series of mega projects from scratch. Only one of these projects, called [The Line, is set to cost a staggering 500 billion](#) dollars alone.¹¹

Moreover, reports indicate that Saudi Arabia is scaling down its mega projects based on financial forecasting. This suggests that Saudi Arabia is becoming increasingly financially prudent. While there is a willingness to contribute to reconstruction efforts in Gaza, the kingdom's own economic projects are a priority that Saudi Arabia is not willing to place on the back burner. The Saudi ruling elite view the restructuring of the Saudi economy as an existential issue. This is a factor that many are overlooking when considering Saudi Arabia's financial role in reconstructing Gaza.

Difficulty in Sending Saudi Security Forces

The Saudi ruling elite have not outright denied being willing to play a security role, but this does not mean they would easily contribute to any security presence. Observers should not be under any illusion about how difficult this step would be *within* a political process leading to a two-state solution, let alone sending a security force outside of a credible peace process. While the idea is not ruled out, its implementation would be tremendously difficult.

Akin to the economic commitments, deploying forces has its fair share of economic costs. There is anxiety about committing to security forces, especially with an unknown timeline for withdrawal. What exacerbates this anxiety is the potential political and diplomatic fallout. Saudi Arabia would want to avoid, at all costs, the perception that its reconstruction efforts are colluding with Israel and that sending security forces would make it complicit in the Israeli occupation.

With that in mind, sending forces is not impossible. The only tangible way this could happen would be if there is a Palestinian mandate inviting an Arab force, of which Saudi forces could be a part. This raises the question of how Saudi forces could contribute. In my estimation, Saudi contributions should play a supplementary role, providing security support in logistics, training, and administration. It is unlikely that Saudi forces would be on the security "frontlines," and Saudi and other GCC forces should avoid taking part in that role. Having Saudi (and other Arab) security forces play a supplementary role is crucial to avoid

¹¹ Beatrice Nolan, "[Saudi Arabia wants China to help fund its struggling \\$500 billion Neom megaproject. Investors may not be too excited.](#)" *Business Insider*, 12 April 2024.

normalizing a non-Palestinian Arab presence. By having an Arab supplementary security role, the Palestinian security agency and capabilities could be improved, which would be crucial for Palestinian institutional building and overall Palestinian agency.

Saudi Public Opinion

Another crucial aspect that the Saudi ruling elite cannot overlook is Saudi public opinion. For decades, Israel has been perceived very negatively within the kingdom. This can be seen time and again, in surveys conducted by think tanks, such as the Arab Center and the Washington Institute of Near East Policy.¹² Saudis held negative perceptions of Israel even before October 7th, and the war has dramatically intensified these views. Although the Saudi government does not claim to be a democratic system, it still relies heavily on domestic legitimacy and support. This situation necessitates a delicate balancing act between maintaining Saudi identity as a leading Muslim and Arab state and managing Saudi interests with international interlocutors which Saudi citizens do not view favorably.

Saudi public opinion poses a significant obstacle for any Saudi security or financial commitment to Gaza after the war. The slightest hint of cooperation with Israel, without a political process aimed at solving the Palestinian issue, is unacceptable to most Saudis. The Saudi foreign ministry has adopted a sharp tone towards Israel, which has resonated with Saudi social discourse, turning anti-Israeli sentiments into a nationalistic expression of loyalty to the Saudi ruling elite. Hashtags like “Saudi Arabia Championing the Palestinian Cause” and images of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman likened to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia have been circulated widely on Saudi social media. It is worth noting that King Faisal, the third Saudi king, led the oil embargo during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and is still revered to this day for that stance. Consequently, there are heightened expectations for Saudi Arabia to advance the Palestinian cause.

Lack of a Political Pathway

The current domestic and political landscapes in both Palestine and Israel are not ripe for any peace process. Saudi Arabia and other Arab states have indicated that the devastation of the war is a result of the lack of a political horizon for the Palestinians. This reflects a conviction among Arab states (and many others internationally) that without a credible political horizon addressing core Palestinian grievances (and Israeli security concerns), violence and resistance are inevitable. A clear momentum towards a political horizon would disincentivize violence; in its absence, the destruction of any rebuilding effort would simply be a matter of time. As the Saudi foreign minister said, [“if we are just resetting to the status quo before Oct. 7 in a way that sets us up for another round of this, as we have seen in the](#)

¹² Catherine Cleveland and David Pollock, [“New Poll Sheds Light on Saudi Views of Israel-Hamas War,”](#) *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 December 2023.

[past, we're not interested in that conversation.](#)"¹³ Thus, without a clear and credible peace process, it will be difficult to see the Saudi ruling elite investing financial, political, and diplomatic capital. Conversely, if a credible political process emerges, it will be difficult not to see the Saudi ruling elite leveraging its financial, political, and diplomatic capital in support of the process.

An Unreformed Palestinian Authority

One of the key themes of the conflict is the question of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Time and again, concerns are raised about its competence, legitimacy, and capacity – all of which are core issues that disincentivize meaningful Saudi engagement. The issue of corruption is particularly crucial with regards to sustainable funding. As mentioned, the Saudi ruling elite is deeply involved in restructuring its own economy, and has conducted a massive anti-corruption campaign in recent years.

Despite strong social support within Saudi Arabia for the Palestinians, there is a degree of fatigue with the PA within the GCC. This should not be misconstrued as pro-Israeli sentiment, as some try to imply, but rather reflects a questioning of why support should be extended to a PA that is perceived as mishandling aid and not doing enough to curb anti-Saudi sentiments on Palestinian streets. This fatigue is not limited to the PA alone, but extends to a general lack of appetite in Saudi Arabia to continue aiding entities that used to receive Saudi support. There is a broader skepticism about spending aid on others while Saudi citizens themselves are facing a transitional period in the Saudi economy.

In this context, the Saudi-European nexus could help catalyze a range of initiatives and frameworks that would instill confidence in decision-makers in Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and other international actors that investing in a two-state-solution is viable.

D. Saudi-European Nexus in Fleshing out the “Pathway” to a Palestinian State

Earlier this year, the Saudi foreign minister was consistent in his stance that for Saudi Arabia to get involved in negotiating the “day after” and normalizing relations with Israel, there needs to be a “credible and irreversible path to a Palestinian state.” The question is: how can this be achieved? There must be a collective effort to incentivize key stakeholders in the conflict. By investing in a new paradigm and a revised logic of regional stability, a joint Saudi-European effort could transform the previous status quo into one that strives towards a political Palestinian-Israeli settlement and a two-state solution. Below are some of the

¹³ Jack Dutton, “[Saudi FM: No Israel normalization without ‘irreversible path’ to Palestinian state,](#)” *Al-Monitor*, 22 January 2024.

spheres in which Saudi Arabia and European states could cooperate to advance a Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

Economic Horizon

Alongside building and improving the essential Palestinian institutions of governance, European countries and Saudi Arabia can collaborate on developing a Palestinian economic vision. While the European Union (EU) has a history of fostering economic cooperation between former rivals, Saudi Arabia is focused on its own economic transformation through Vision 2030. Similarly, Qatar has its 2030 vision, and Oman has its 2040 vision. This era of “visions” in the Gulf region underscores a natural opportunity for Saudi, GCC, and European cooperation.

By building a Palestinian economic vision that aligns with regional economic projects, Saudi Arabia, European states, and others can remain committed to supporting a Palestinian economic horizon, reflecting the region’s current focus. Importantly, this economic horizon would not be a substitute for a political horizon, but rather, would contribute to the political horizon that is needed for a two-state solution.

In addition, once momentum builds around a Palestinian vision with Saudi-European support, and this vision is connected to regional projects, it could facilitate joint Palestinian-Israeli economic ventures. Although this may seem distant given the current situation, a new generation of Palestinians, Israelis, and Arabs is increasingly committed to working together for regional advancement. European states can help by providing a platform for these joint projects, which would attract Arab support. Such efforts would also contribute to genuine Arab-Israeli integration and enable the private sector to play a significant role in supporting peace-building within a credible political framework.

The key benefit lies not just in achieving economic goals, but in creating a process for pursuing regional economic visions. Taking a lesson from Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, it becomes clear that the goal is not merely to reach specific milestones by 2030, but rather to generate a continuous process of economic development.

While the Abraham Accords have demonstrated limited potential for advancing Palestinian-Israeli peace directly, the European states can leverage the Accords to support a peace process. Specifically, the Abraham Accords can help build infrastructure that facilitates economic integration between the West Bank and Gaza, potentially through a “West Bank-Gaza belt”.

Green Cooperation

There is a question that must be asked: Are Palestinian institutions ready for the challenges of the 21st century? Are they equipped to tackle climate challenges? Are these institutions prepared to address issues of cybersecurity and artificial intelligence? Against the backdrop of the occupation and poor governance, the clear answer is no. That being said, these questions related to Palestinian security in a broader sense illuminate spheres of cooperation in which Saudi Arabia, European states, and other GCC states could play a role.

In the endeavor to reform the PA and support Palestinians, Saudi Arabia, GCC states, and European countries could take part in a joint institutional effort. Currently, European countries have environmental policies that can be combined with Saudi and GCC green initiatives. Specifically, the Green cooperation could build up on, or be aligned with, the [Saudi Green Initiative](#).¹⁴ Initiated in 2021, the Saudi government has set itself ambitious climate targets, aligning with its broader goals. Not only does Saudi Arabia seek to be a global leader in this regard, but it also intends to work on regional climate cooperation through the [Saudi Middle East Green Initiative](#).¹⁵

This is where Saudi-European-Palestinian green cooperation could leverage the regional trajectory to its advantage. Moreover, the internationalization of climate projects offers a natural sphere for joint Saudi-European initiatives. These projects could not only bolster Palestinian state-building, but also facilitate a Saudi-EU-GCC framework that connects strengthened Palestinian institutions to Israeli green projects.

Developing a Middle-Level

As tragic as the events of October 7th are, the discussion of the “day after” suggests the emergence of a new order in Arab-Israeli relations. The previous order had its norms and communication practices, which were often implicit, tacit, and secretive. What it lacked was a functioning Arab-Israeli middle-level – a network of Arab and Israeli scholars and journalists who openly and publicly engage with the aim of Palestinian-Israeli peace. This “middle-level” refers to a network of predominantly Arab and Israeli academics, experts, journalists, and officials whose main objective is to achieve policy impact by influencing public discourse.

The Abraham Accords exemplify the value of a middle-level in shaping discourse and policy. What is notable about the Abraham Accords, beyond the landmark agreement in September 2020, is how public discourse evolved in the years leading up to it. Persistent Israeli discursive proactivity, in tandem with the typical pragmatic responses from the GCC, shifted the narrative. This shift gradually reframed the discourse from viewing peace between

¹⁴ “[SGI: steering Saudi Arabia towards a green future](#),” *Saudi & Middle East Green Initiatives*.

¹⁵ “[MGI: powering regional climate action](#),” *Saudi & Middle East Green Initiatives*.

Palestinians and Israelis as a prerequisite for Saudi-Israeli normalization to seeing normalization as achievable independently of Palestinian-Israeli peace. Essentially, a media-savvy Israeli and Western middle-level helped to normalize the discourse around the Gulf–Israeli normalization separate from a Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

While it may still be uncomfortable for some Arabs to engage with “Israel” or “Israelis,” at least in some parts of the Arab world and in the Gulf, working with Israel is increasingly seen as less of a taboo. This shift presents an opportunity. European states can play a pivotal role in institutionalizing forums for an Arab-Israeli middle-level consisting of scholars, analysts, think-tanks, journalists, young professionals, and young entrepreneurs who can drive innovative initiatives and advance the peace process.

Some of the key objectives of the middle-level would include, but are not limited to: keeping the policies of a two-state solution on the agenda, generating new spaces for cooperation, acting as a hub and nexus between bottom-up and top-down initiatives, and conducting the heavy lifting of public diplomacy. Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and Europe can support this middle-level by providing platforms, funding, and exposure for public diplomacy efforts.

E. Key takeaways

- There are immense obstacles to Saudi Arabia providing funding and security for the “day after” in Gaza.
- European states should help incentivize Arab Gulf states by clarifying the pathway towards a Palestinian state.
- European states should take a more active role in establishing a credible Palestinian-Israeli political track by facilitating joint Palestinian-Israeli cooperation and ventures.
- European states should work to link joint Palestinian-Israeli initiatives with regional (economic) projects.
- European states should support the development of an Arab-Israeli middle-level focused on pro-peace public diplomacy.
- European states should collaborate with regional actors to establish a paradigm centered on regional security and stability to keep Saudi Arabia and other regional actors invested in the peace process.