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Normalization Through Strength?
A Dual Israeli–Saudi Examination of Power, Perception, and the Limits of Military-Centric

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Abstract: *This paper examines the concept of "normalization through strength" through a dual Israeli-Saudi lens, arguing that military power alone cannot generate sustainable regional integration. Tracing the rise of this framework within Israeli strategic thinking – especially after the Abraham Accords and following October 7 – the paper shows how Israeli leaders and much of the public came to believe that demonstrations of force could substitute for diplomacy and political compromise. Juxtaposing this with the Saudi perspective, which prioritizes stability, predictability, territorial integrity, and political legitimacy, the paper demonstrates how the same Israeli actions interpreted domestically as deterrence were perceived in Riyadh as destabilizing and risky. Focusing on the Israeli-Saudi case, it argues that "normalization through strength" failed not because Israel lacked power, but because power was decoupled from restraint, diplomacy, and credible political horizons – most notably regarding the Palestinian issue. The paper concludes that future normalization depends less on raw strength than on reliability: the ability to embed military capability within a coherent diplomatic strategy grounded in restraint, accountability, and regional stability.*

A. Introduction: The Return of the Debate on Power and Peace

The war that erupted on October 7 and the regional escalation that followed reignited a long-standing debate at the heart of Middle Eastern politics: the relationship between military power, political legitimacy, and peace. In Israel, this moment intensified an already entrenched belief that military strength is not only essential for security, but also a viable pathway to regional integration and normalization. This perception, reinforced by the Abraham Accords and further radicalized by post–October 7 dynamics, rests on the assumption that demonstrations of force can deter adversaries, compel accommodation, and ultimately substitute for diplomatic compromise. Yet as the regional fallout of Israel's military-centric approach accumulated, this assumption increasingly came into tension with how key Arab actors interpreted the same behaviour.

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This paper examines that gap through a dual Israeli–Saudi lens. It traces how "normalization through strength",[1] emerged as a dominant framework within Israeli strategic thinking, and why this logic ultimately failed to produce the expected results in the Saudi context. By juxtaposing Israeli perceptions of power and deterrence with Saudi priorities of stability, predictability, and political legitimacy, the paper argues that military strength alone cannot generate normalization. Instead, when power is decoupled from credible diplomacy and political restraint, it may undermine rather than advance regional integration. Understanding this divergence is essential for assessing the limits of military-centric regional strategies and for imagining alternative post-war regional architectures.

Since this paper was originally drafted during the final months of 2025, the regional environment has undergone a profound transformation. On February 28, 2026, a war broke out between Israel and the United States on the one hand and Iran on the other, rapidly escalating into a broader regional confrontation. The conflict extended beyond its initial theatres, including direct Iranian attacks on Gulf states, among them Saudi Arabia, and generating widespread instability across multiple arenas. These developments only sharpen the argument advanced in this paper and place it under increasing pressure in real-world conditions. What had previously been a matter of strategic assessment – namely, whether military power could serve as a viable pathway to regional integration – is now being subjected to a real-time stress test shaped by unfolding regional dynamics.

B. The Israeli Lens: Military Strength as a Primary Tool of Regional Integration

Israel's reliance on military power as a central tool for securing its existence and positioning itself within the Middle East long predates the events of October 7. From the state's very establishment, military strength was not only a means of physical survival but also a core component of Israel's self-understanding and regional identity. In a hostile regional environment, power was seen as the primary currency through which Israel could deter adversaries, compel recognition, and eventually gain acceptance. This logic closely echoes Ze'ev Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" doctrine, which argued that only the establishment of overwhelming and undeniable strength would eventually lead regional adversaries to acquiesce to Israel's permanence. Over time, this paradigm proved remarkably resilient within Israeli strategic thinking, repeatedly eclipsing alternative approaches that emphasized regional integration, political reconciliation, or negotiated peace processes. As a result, reliance on force became deeply embedded in Israel's strategic culture, shaping both policy choices and public expectations.

The Abraham Accords signed in 2020 did not create this mindset, but they significantly reinforced and intensified it. For many Israelis – and crucially, for policymakers and political elites who actively promoted this interpretation – the accords appeared to provide empirical proof that Israel could normalize relations with Arab states based on shared interests and power asymmetries alone, without resolving the Palestinian issue. Normalization with the UAE, Bahrain, and later Morocco was widely interpreted as confirmation that military strength, technological superiority, and intelligence capabilities could substitute for political

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[1] About the idea of "Normalization through Strength" see: Gil Murciano, "Peace Through Strength – Israel's Version: Abandoning Diplomacy for a Military-Only Strategy," *Mitvim*, August 2025.

compromise. Within Israeli discourse, the accords thus came to be seen not only as diplomatic achievements, but as validation of a broader strategic assumption as well: that Israel could integrate into the region through strength.

From the Israeli perspective, the Abraham Accords also reinforced a specific and ultimately misleading interpretation of Arab motivations. A dominant reading within Israeli political and strategic discourse held that Arab states normalized relations with Israel primarily in order to confront a common threat – Iran. According to this logic, normalization was not fundamentally about reconciliation, legitimacy, or political horizons, but about constructing a regional bloc divided into two camps: those aligned with Iran and those aligned against it. Within this worldview, Israel's military power was perceived as the main asset that Arab states sought to harness. The assumption was therefore simple and seductive: the stronger Israel appears militarily, the greater the incentive for Arab states to normalize with it. From this erroneous premise begins the original sin of "normalization through strength" – the belief that military power itself is the engine of political integration.

The shock of October 7 and the subsequent regional escalation further radicalized this belief. Faced with profound trauma, insecurity, and a sense of existential threat, Israeli political and public discourse increasingly framed military power as the central – and at times exclusive – instrument for safeguarding Israel's future. While reliance on force has always been part of Israel's strategic DNA, the post–October 7 period marked a qualitative shift. Military strength was no longer viewed merely as a tool for defence or deterrence, but as a substitute for diplomacy itself, and as a means of shaping Israel's regional standing vis-à-vis both adversaries and potential partners.

From the Israeli perspective, "strength" has traditionally been understood in tangible operational terms: battlefield superiority, intelligence dominance, freedom of action, and deterrence vis-à-vis hostile actors. Yet these operational capabilities were never purely tactical; they were also intended to serve broader strategic purposes – building Israel's regional stature, signalling resolve, and positioning Israel as a dominant regional power. In the post-October 7 environment, however, expectations surrounding strength expanded further. The events of this day not only exposed severe security and intelligence failures but also shattered Israel's self-perception – and regional image – as an invulnerable actor defined by technological and intelligence superiority. Rather than prompting a fundamental reassessment of strategy, this shock reinforced the perceived necessity of overwhelming military action as a mean of restoring what had been lost. Military success thus increasingly came to be seen as capable of performing political and symbolic functions: rebuilding deterrence, reasserting dominance, reshaping regional alignments, compelling moderation among adversaries, and incentivizing cooperation and normalization among Arab states.

This expansion of expectations is clearly reflected in Israeli public opinion. Survey data discussed in recent Mitvim-led forums show that a significant portion of the Israeli public believes that Israel's military confrontation with Iran in June 2025 either improved or did not harm prospects for normalization with Arab states. Similar patterns emerge regarding Gaza: despite widespread international criticism and visible strain on Israel's regional relations, a substantial number of Israelis perceive the ongoing war as either neutral or even beneficial to Israel's standing in the Arab world. These views do not stem from ignorance, but from a deeply internalized belief that power itself generates political gravity – that displays of force both deter enemies and attract partners. This belief is further reinforced by a pervasive

assumption within Israeli discourse that "the Middle East only understands force," an assumption that, as this paper demonstrates, reveals more about Israel's own strategic worldview than about the perceptions and priorities of its Arab counterparts.

At the policy level, this mindset translated into confidence that shared threat perceptions – especially regarding Iran – would override political, societal, and symbolic constraints in Arab capitals. Normalization was therefore conceptualized less as a negotiated political process and more as a strategic-security alignment among like-minded actors. Within this framework, the Palestinian issue was viewed as secondary, postponable, or manageable once regional integration had sufficiently advanced. The Abraham Accords reinforced this reading, serving as supposed evidence that Israel could move forward with the Arab world while leaving the Palestinian question off the table.

Crucially, this approach was not merely ideological; it was deeply shaped by Israel's domestic political trajectory over the past decade and a half. Successive governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu since 2009 adopted a doctrine of "conflict management" rather than conflict resolution, particularly with regard to the Palestinians. Advancing a genuine political process would have required steps that were politically costly, destabilizing for governing coalitions, or outright impossible within Israel's domestic landscape. Managing the conflict, by contrast, allowed Netanyahu to avoid these costs while preserving political stability and personal rule. This logic shaped not only Netanyahu's governments but also the horizons of political imagination for much of the Israeli political class. Even alternative leaders internalized the assumption that progress on the Palestinian issue was unrealistic, undesirable, or unnecessary. Netanyahu himself reportedly stated that behind closed doors the Palestinian issue was no longer seriously discussed, while Naftali Bennett openly described it as something Israel could live with indefinitely – famously referring to it as "a splinter in the buttock."

This domestic political logic also has to do with the erosion of Israel's diplomatic capacity. Over many years, Netanyahu systematically weakened the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hollowing it out institutionally and concentrating foreign policy decision-making in his own hands. Diplomacy increasingly became subordinate to narrow domestic political needs rather than long-term strategic planning. In the absence of a functioning diplomatic apparatus or coherent political vision, military force emerged as the path of least resistance: decisive, popular, and politically cost-free. Military-based security enjoys near-total consensus within Israeli society, cutting across coalition and opposition lines. Military action against perceived threats therefore carries little political price, while diplomatic concessions – especially on the Palestinian issue – are framed as dangerous, divisive, and destabilizing. Against this backdrop, the post-October 7 period did not merely reinforce existing trends; it interacted with a specific political framework. Israel's current government – probably the most right-wing in the country's history – operates under constant pressure from extreme-right elements that categorically reject Palestinian statehood or meaningful political compromise. Within this context, the idea that normalization could be achieved through the expression of might, without addressing Palestinian demands, gained renewed traction. This perception has also been articulated explicitly by senior political figures. After the military confrontation with Iran, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich captured this logic bluntly when he declared: "We live in a neighbourhood where everyone runs away from the weak and joins the strong." This statement reflects a growing belief within the Israeli leadership that

demonstrations of military power do not merely deter enemies but actively attract partners – that strength itself generates diplomatic momentum. Rather than being widely recognized as a risky assumption, it became politically convenient and ideologically aligned with the governing coalition's worldview.

A further, often under-acknowledged element shaping Israeli strategic behaviour is a deeply rooted belief that survival in the Middle East requires Israel to be perceived as the region's "madman" – the actor everyone fears and therefore avoids confronting. This idea, echoed not only by politicians but also by journalists and commentators, long predates the current government and the aftermath of October 7. It is grounded in the assumption that unpredictability, disproportionate responses, and a willingness to escalate without restraint will deter adversaries and compel respect.

Within this framework, being feared is conflated with being respected, and respect is assumed to translate into political leverage and normalization. Yet this logic contains a fundamental flaw. While fear may deter direct confrontation, it does not generate trust, partnership, or willingness to cooperate. On the contrary, fear – especially when associated with unpredictability – tends to intensify security dilemmas. Faced with an actor perceived as volatile or unconstrained, regional states are more likely to arm themselves, hedge against escalation, and prepare for worst-case scenarios rather than pursue deeper cooperation. Regional actors may avoid the "madman," but they do not build alliances with him, nor do they normalize relations with an actor perceived as uncontrollable. Over time, this self-image has thus shifted from a deterrent posture into a strategic liability, particularly in a regional environment where stability and predictability are paramount.

At the heart of this problem lies a deeper Israeli confusion between deterrence and partnership – a confusion that can be traced back to the legacy of the Iron Wall. Jabotinsky's doctrine was designed to answer a specific question: how to force adversaries to accept the existence of the Jewish state through overwhelming strength. It offered a logic of deterrence and reluctant recognition, not a theory of partnership, reconciliation, or integration. Yet over time, Israeli strategic culture blurred this distinction. Tools designed to produce deterrence were increasingly expected to produce partnership as well. Israelis were taught that what deters enemies must also attract allies. In reality, the two logics often diverge. Deterrence is built on fear and cost-imposition; partnership is built on trust, predictability, and shared political horizons. Israel now faces a strategic choice: whether it seeks primarily to be feared or to be relied upon. If it chooses the path of integration and partnership, it will have to make decisions – some of them politically painful – that increase its reliability rather than merely its power.

Israeli military behaviour across multiple arenas reflected this logic. In Gaza, the pursuit of an undefined "decisive victory" became both a strategic objective and a political narrative, despite the absence of a credible political endgame. In Lebanon and Syria, Israel prioritized operational freedom, targeted strikes, and buffer zones while largely abstaining from political engagement with emerging governmental actors. In the Iranian context, military confrontation was followed by minimal diplomatic initiative, reinforcing a cycle of deterrence without agreed rules. This approach also manifested in actions such as the failed Israeli airstrike targeting Hamas leadership in Doha, Qatar in September 2025 – an attempt to "solve" a problem through force by bombing yet another Arab capital. The strike not only

failed operationally, but further damaged Israel's regional credibility and reinforced perceptions of recklessness.

Nowhere was this logic more evident than in Israel's approach to normalization. Saudi Arabia, long viewed in Israel as the "crown jewel" of Arab normalization, came to symbolize the ultimate prize: full regional acceptance and strategic integration. Prior to October 7, many Israelis believed normalization with Riyadh was imminent and could be achieved without progress on the Palestinian issue. This belief rested on a profound misreading of Saudi motivations. Israeli discourse projected urgency and desire onto Saudi Arabia, assuming that shared concerns over Iran and admiration for Israel's military power would compel Riyadh to move forward. In reality, this reflected a misunderstanding of the Saudi mindset, which prioritizes stability, predictability, and political legitimacy over raw displays of force.

C. The Saudi Lens: Stability, Predictability, and the Centrality of the Palestinian Issue

To better understand how Saudi Arabia views the region, it is essential to take into account its internal transformations. Any observer of Saudi Arabia cannot escape the significance of vision 2030 – a broad framework encompassing a range of pillars, principles, and objectives aimed at maximizing Saudi potential across multiple fields. Its central goal is to create a more diversified and sustainable economy for the growing Saudi population. Such economic diversification cannot properly take place without social reforms, which were long viewed as constraining Saudi entrepreneurship – particularly in an increasingly globalized world.

For the Saudi ruling elite to achieve these ambitious national projects, regional stability is indispensable. Saudi Arabia seeks stability as it aims to become the region's primary economic and logistical hub, leveraging its geography at the intersection of three continents. Stability is also critical along the Red Sea, where investments exceeding one trillion dollars are planned. The Kingdom's vast borders further compel Saudi policymakers to think in regional terms: national stability is inseparable from regional stability. This logic explains why the Saudi leadership has embarked on a process of recalibrating relations with regional actors. This process began in 2021 with the end of a four-year diplomatic rift with Qatar, and was most clearly demonstrated by the normalization of relations with Iran in March 2023.

When the Saudi Crown Prince was asked in an interview about the Kingdom's foreign policy philosophy, he responded succinctly: "Saudi first." Yet "Saudi first" does not mean Saudi alone. Rather, Riyadh has sought to leverage its symbolic and geostrategic weight to promote a cooperative regional spirit – one that does not exclude Israel. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly expressed openness to Israel's regional integration, while conditioning it on a just resolution of the Palestinian issue. However, while Israel was once viewed as a potential partner in regional development, successive Israeli governments have increasingly been perceived as contributing to regional instability.

Within this framework, Saudi Arabia's strategic outlook is that of a status-quo power. The Saudi ruling elite prefers a regional order composed of stable monarchies or republics that provide predictability and continuity in strategic calculations. In practical terms, this

translates into a preference for working with established governments rather than proxies, or sub-state actors. While there have been exceptions – such as early Saudi engagement with the Assad regime during the initial phase of the Arab Spring in Syria – support for opposition forces came only after sustained and unsuccessful attempts to persuade Assad to alter his policies. Overall, Saudi Arabia's preference for engaging recognized governments reflects a desire to avoid entanglement in the internal political complexities of neighboring countries.

It is here that Saudi and Israeli strategies increasingly diverge. Israel's support for Druze factions in Syria led by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri is perceived in Riyadh as opportunistic interference that undermines Saudi strategic objectives in Syria. Similarly, Israel's recent recognition of Somaliland is viewed with concern, as are reports of Israeli contacts with Yemen's Southern Transitional Council, which seeks to establish an independent state in what was formerly South Yemen. From a Saudi perspective, such actions threaten regional coherence and risk exacerbating instability. These divergences highlight a growing security incompatibility between Saudi and Israeli regional approaches.

D. Why "Normalization Through Strength" Failed in the Israeli-Saudi Context?

From the Israeli vantage point, the logic of normalization through strength appeared internally coherent. Israel sought to demonstrate resolve, eliminate threats, and position itself as a pillar of a new regional security architecture. Yet this logic underestimated how Israeli actions were perceived beyond its borders – particularly in Saudi Arabia and other moderate Sunni Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, whose overriding concern is regime stability and regional predictability.

Israeli policymakers often assumed that Arab partners would interpret Israel's military activism as a shared asset against common enemies. In practice, many of these states perceived the same behaviour as deeply destabilizing. The prolonged war in Gaza, repeated Israeli strikes across multiple theatres, the failed attack in Doha, and the possibility of renewed confrontation with Iran raised fears not of Iranian resurgence but of uncontrollable regional escalation. Rather than anchoring a regional coalition, Israel increasingly appeared as a source of risk.

This perceptual gap was compounded by Israel's focus on short-term military objectives in the absence of a long-term diplomatic strategy. While Saudi Arabia and other moderate Arab states pursued de-escalation, mediation, and reconstruction efforts – in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria – Israel remained committed to operational maintenance and tactical dominance. The result was not increased closeness, but growing distance.

Israeli military operations have extended deep into Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria. In the Syrian context, Saudi Arabia has sought to strengthen the new and fragile government led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, with the aim of gradually reintegrating Syria into the Arab World in a manner consistent with Saudi regional preferences. While the collapse of the Assad regime occurred more than a year after the start of the Gaza War, the continuation of conflict in both Gaza and Lebanon made Israeli military operations in Syria appear as a natural extension

of a broader campaign. From the Saudi perspective, however, these actions generated not only frustration, but heightened security concerns even more.

No episode was more alarming for Saudi Arabia than the twelve-day war between Israel and Iran. "Operation Rising Lion" demonstrated Israel's capacity to strike Iranian targets extensively, while Iran's subsequent missile attacks – some of which penetrated Israel's multilayered air-defense systems – highlighted the destructive capabilities of both actors. For Saudi Arabia, the war underscored the danger posed by two powerful countries it regards as security threats. These concerns are amplified by the fact that Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab states, lies geographically between Iran and Israel and would bear consequences of further escalation.

Saudi Arabia has invested substantial diplomatic capital in its rapprochement with Iran precisely to mitigate such risks. Saudi leadership is acutely aware that influential elements within the Iranian regime view the Kingdom as an extension of the United States – widely perceived in Tehran as Israel's ultimate guarantor. Consequently, Riyadh remains highly sensitive to the risk of Iranian retaliation, particularly in scenarios framed as existential threats to the Iranian regime. This sensitivity helps explain why Israeli military campaigns that are viewed in both Israel and Washington as enhancing deterrence instead exacerbate Saudi security anxieties.

As a result, Israel – once seen by some as a stabilizing regional actor – has increasingly been perceived as an agent of chaos: powerful yet unpredictable, capable yet risky to be closely associated with. This perception did not merely stall normalization efforts; it actively pushed potential partners further away. Moreover, Israel's claim to operate militarily "at will" risks framing any future normalization as a product of coercion rather than mutual interest. In such a context, Saudi Arabia could appear to be acquiescing under pressure, almost as being bullied into normalization – a dynamic that would further entrench anti-Israel sentiment rather than facilitate normalization.

These concerns are compounded by Israel's recognition of breakaway entities such as Somaliland. From a Saudi perspective, this development is troubling for two main reasons. First, Israeli activity in Yemen could intensify due to Somaliland's proximity to Houthi-controlled areas. Both the Houthis and Iran have already warned that Israeli recognition of Somaliland would be treated as a hostile act. While Israeli and American airstrikes have inflicted damage on Houthi capabilities, airpower alone has demonstrated limited strategic effectiveness, increasing the risk of retaliatory escalation. Much like the anxiety generated by the twelve-day war, Saudi Arabia would face heightened concern if Israeli-Houthi military confrontation were to intensify, as the Houthis could respond to Israeli strikes by targeting Saudi Arabia, being viewed as part of a "Zionist collaborator" axis.

Second, the prospect of an Israeli military presence in Somaliland expends Saudi Arabia's zone of insecurity by broadening the geographic scope of direct Israel-Iran confrontation. During the twelve-day war, Saudi Arabia was primarily concerned with its eastern flank. A growing Israeli footprint in the Horn of Africa could extend this frontline westward as well. In this sense, Israel's pursuit of normalization through strength not only distances Saudi-Israeli normalization but actively undermines Saudi national security.

Developments since the drafting of this paper have further underscored these dynamics. The events of February-March 2026 have begun to bring these concerns into sharper relief. The regional war that followed the Israeli–American confrontation with Iran exposed Gulf states directly to the consequences of large-scale escalation. Iranian attacks on Gulf territory, including Saudi Arabia, transformed what had previously been perceived as a strategic risk into an immediate security reality. From the perspective of Riyadh and other Gulf capitals, the war underscored the extent to which they could become unwilling participants in a broader confrontation driven by actors beyond their control.

While Israeli policymakers may interpret such a confrontation as reinforcing a shared threat environment vis-à-vis Iran, the perception in Gulf states has been markedly different. Rather than generating reassurance or alignment, the war has deepened concerns regarding regional unpredictability and the potential costs of association with Israeli military activism. In this sense, the ongoing conflict with Iran further underscores a critical distinction: shared adversaries do not automatically produce shared strategic trust. On the contrary, when confrontation leads to regional spillover and direct harm to third parties, it may reinforce the perception of Israel not as a stabilizing partner, but as a source of systemic risk.

The war therefore did not resolve the central tension presented in this paper; it intensified it. Israeli military power demonstrated its reach and effectiveness, yet at the same time amplified the very anxieties – regarding escalation, unpredictability, and regional destabilization – that have constrained normalization from the Saudi perspective.

E. Toward a New Model: From Strength to Reliability

From the Israeli side, recalibrating the path toward normalization requires more than a rhetorical recommitment to diplomacy; it demands the production of credible political signals that military power is both bounded and subordinate to a coherent political vision. The failure of normalization through strength was not rooted in Israel's lack of capabilities, but in the absence of clear limits on how and to what ends those capabilities would be used. For potential partners such as Saudi Arabia, reassurance depends less on Israel's strength itself than on Israel's demonstrated willingness to restrain, channel, and politically contextualize that strength.

In the short term, Israel must therefore restore diplomacy as a central instrument of statecraft, not merely as an auxiliary to military action. This includes re-empowering the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and articulating explicit political endgames, particularly with regard to Gaza. Yet predictability and reliability are shaped not only by policy outputs, but also by political processes. As Israeli decision-making has become increasingly centralized and personalized – often driven by narrow political considerations and insulated from institutional oversight – Israel has appeared more volatile and less predictable to regional partners. Military operations conducted without a defined political horizon, and without transparent or collectively anchored decision-making processes, reinforce perceptions of escalation and uncertainty even when they achieve tactical success. By contrast, strengthening democratic institutions – such as parliamentary oversight, transparency in decision-making, and the role of professional gatekeepers within government ministries – alongside a revitalized diplomatic apparatus can serve as powerful signals of rationality, restraint, and reliability. In

this sense, reinforcing Israeli democracy is not only an internal matter, but a strategic prerequisite for rebuilding regional trust and reducing anxiety.

Equally important is Israel's ability to clarify its negative intentions – that is, what it does not seek to achieve through force. For normalization to be credible, Israel must provide sustained and believable assurances that military action will not be used to alter borders, entrench permanent territorial control, or fragment neighbouring states. This includes clear commitments not to annex or permanently settle territories occupied through military means, and not to pursue policies that undermine the territorial unity of Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, or other neighbouring arenas. For Saudi Arabia and other Arab actors, respect for territorial integrity is not a peripheral issue but a foundational condition for trust and long-term engagement.

At a deeper level, Israel must also demonstrate a willingness to accept political constraints on its own freedom of action. Credibility is not generated solely through declarations, but through costly choices that signal intent. Restraint in secondary arenas, avoidance of unnecessary theatre expansion, and prioritization of diplomatic channels even when military options are available all function as tests by which regional actors assess Israel's reliability. Such steps inevitably involve trade-offs, including domestic political costs and short-term limitations on tactical flexibility. Yet without accepting these costs, Israel is unlikely to convince potential partners that its power can serve as a stabilizing rather than destabilizing force.

In the longer term, rebuilding Israel's regional standing requires embedding military strength within a renewed diplomatic doctrine – one that treats normalization not as the byproduct of dominance, but as the outcome of sustained political engagement, reciprocity, and predictability. Only by demonstrating that strength is governed by restraint, and deterrence by political purpose, can Israel begin to reposition itself as a partner for whom normalization is not merely possible, but strategically desirable.

If normalization is ultimately a question of credibility and signalling rather than raw power, then Saudi Arabia's own agency in defining, communicating, and sequencing normalization conditions becomes equally central.

This leads to the question of what Saudi Arabia can do. Saudi Arabia has often been expected, and at times pressured, to play a more proactive role. However, such expectations tend to overlook the complexity of the position in which the Kingdom finds itself. The Saudi leadership is acutely aware that the shielding of the Israeli government by the United States is a major complicating factor. This is further compounded by the extent to which Saudi and American interests are intertwined, which constrains Riyadh's ability to exert significant direct pressure on Israel.

Nevertheless, there are steps Saudi Arabia can take both to reinforce its red lines of normalization and to reorient the normalization process toward a healthier trajectory in which the Israeli-Palestinian issue remains a central pillar.

First, Saudi Arabia can articulate more clearly – in the Hebrew language – the ways in which Israeli government policies obstruct the two-state solution. There has already been a noticeable evolution of Saudi official discourse in this regard. The Saudi Ministry of Foreign

Affairs has become more precise in its references to specific Israeli measures, including explicitly highlighting the problematic nature of actions such as the potential annexation of the E1 settlement area. If such statements were also communicated in Hebrew, they could help shape discourse within Israel itself by linking regional support and normalization prospects to meaningful progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In this sense, Saudi Arabia could address its concerns not only to governments, but directly to the Israeli public. At the same time, Saudi Arabia can leverage English-language and public diplomacy to engage the United States more directly in shaping the strategic context of normalization. By articulating its approach clearly and more openly to American political and policy elites – Riyadh can seek to align U.S. expectations and leverage with Saudi red lines and sequencing preferences. Such efforts are likely to be most effective when undertaken collectively, with Saudi Arabia acting as the head of a broader Arab coalition rather than in isolation, thereby reinforcing regional consensus and increasing the political weight of these messages in Washington.

This connects to a second, broader issue: the reorientation of normalization itself. Prior to October 7, peace and normalization had rarely appeared so disconnected. For many in Israel and beyond, normalization came to be understood as a means of bypassing the Palestinian question altogether. By withholding normalization and explicitly conditioning it on the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Saudi leadership has effectively re-sequenced the process. While Israeli-Palestinian peace may remain elusive in the near term, Saudi Arabia has used this period to deepen its engagement with the Palestinian Authority.

In practical terms, Saudi Arabia can continue to strengthen Palestinian economic capacity and institutional resilience. It has already begun to do so through the signing of a range of memoranda of understanding and the initiation of a Saudi-Palestinian business council in early 2025. As with the previous point, communicating these efforts in Hebrew could help convey to Israeli audiences that Saudi engagement is aimed at strengthening institutions and economic foundations necessary for a two-state solution, rather than at pursuing anti-Israeli measures per se.

F. Conclusion: A joint Vision for Post-War Regional Architecture

The Israeli–Saudi case demonstrates that normalization through strength is not merely ineffective, but structurally flawed when applied as a substitute for political engagement. While military power remains a necessary component of regional security, its overextension into the diplomatic realm has produced diminishing returns for Israel. Actions intended to project deterrence and leadership were often interpreted by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states as destabilizing, unpredictable, and strategically risky. Rather than accelerating normalization, Israel's reliance on force deepened perceptual gaps, amplified security anxieties, and reinforced the very obstacles it sought to bypass – most notably the centrality of the Palestinian issue and the importance of regional stability.

The ongoing regional war started on February 2026 further reinforces this conclusion by pushing the debate over "normalization through strength" from the realm of strategic assumption into a real-time stress test. The conflict may have strengthened the perception among some Israeli actors that a shared threat from Iran could serve as a foundation for deeper regional alignment. However, as the preceding analysis suggests, from the

perspective of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, the war simultaneously underscored the risks of being drawn into large-scale confrontation and exposed the limits of relying on military power as a pathway to political integration. The result is not a straightforward convergence, but a more complex reality in which shared concerns coexist with heightened mistrust and caution.

A viable post-war regional architecture therefore requires a conceptual shift: from strength as spectacle to reliability as strategy. For normalization to become feasible, Israel must be seen not only as powerful, but as a credible, restrained, and politically accountable actor – one capable of embedding military capabilities within a coherent diplomatic vision. From the Saudi perspective, normalization is inseparable from respect for territorial integrity, predictable behaviour, and a political horizon that addresses, rather than marginalizes, the Palestinian question. Bridging these perspectives does not demand the abandonment of strength, but its recalibration. Only by aligning power with restraint, and deterrence with diplomacy, can Israeli–Arab normalization move from an illusion of inevitability to a sustainable regional reality. The events of 2026 make clear that while strength may shape the region, only reliability can secure a sustainable path to regional integration and normalization.