

Strengthening Israel-Saudi Arabia Co-Existence towards Peaceful and Stable Middle East

Ajinde Oluwashakin^{1*}, Michael Aleyomi²

¹Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Federal University, Oye Ekiti, Nigeria

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*Corresponding author: Ajinde Oluwashakin

Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

One of the specific objectives of the United States President Joe Biden's Middle East visit, in July 2022, was the intent of Saudi Arabia normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel. However, this was largely unachieved despite the fact that Israel and Saudi Arabia had long been in secret cooperation, without formal diplomatic relations between them, since Israel attained nationhood in 1948. This article sought to examine the concrete barriers to normalization of relations, extolling cooperation and disentangling the cyclic ambivalences of Saudi government towards Israel. Certain barriers could be removed, aimed at strengthening normal peaceful co-existence between the two countries. The neorealist and neoliberal theoretical perspectives are adopted as framework of analysis. Data were derived from both primary and secondary sources, made up of interview, government official documents and independent mediascape. Findings showed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained the concrete barrier to normalized Saudi-Israeli relations. But areas of cooperation between the two countries, albeit covertly, include trade and common stance against security concerns. These and other areas of cooperation could be broadened to strengthen peaceful co-existence between the two neighbours. And more determined diplomatic efforts must continue, to resolve the generational and intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict on 'two-state' solution basis. In conclusion, the ambivalences that have characterized relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia need be discarded. A Palestinian statehood is attainable, with rights of mutual co-existence between the parties and removing nuclear threat and need for balance of power, all necessary to make the Middle East relatively stable and peaceful.

Keywords: Israel-Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Co-existence, Stability, Cooperation, Israel-Palestinian conflict. Balance of power.

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INTRODUCTION

Since Israel achieved statehood in 1948, the United States (US) policy in the Middle East had essentially been to maintain a delicate balance between the Jewish State and its Arab neighbours. Nonetheless, successive US administrations have overtly expressed their unalloyed support for Israel's security and the need for statehood for the Palestinians. But efforts towards achieving Palestinian statehood had stalled since 2014 when peace talks between both sides ended in deadlock under US President Barack Obama administration, and Joe Biden as Vice President.

However, Joe Biden, as president since January 2020, has not made concerted effort towards bringing the Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table. Thus, that his visit to the region, partly though, with the intent of bringing Israel and Saudi Arabia to

normalization of diplomatic relations failed, was not surprising. Because for long, Saudi Arabia had made such official diplomatic relations with Israel dependent on resolving the question of the Palestinian statehood. Nevertheless, it is covertly known that both Israel and Saudi Arabia have unofficial interactions and cooperation in certain areas, such as trade, technology and security, promoting their mutual interests.

These are the areas this study is set out to explore and which could be strengthened between the two countries in the interest of peace and stability of the region. In addition, a tangential mention will be made in light of the March 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement and implication for Saudi-Israel ambivalent relations. In this regard, the paper is structured broadly into five parts, starting with this introductory section. The other parts include the background and theoretical perspectives;

barriers to normalization of relations; areas of cooperation; and conclusion.

BACKGROUND

On November 29, 1947, virtually all Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, voted against the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, with Resolution 181, that created two states in the region—One Arab and One Jewish, and Jerusalem as separate governing city (United Nations, n.d). In the first Arab-Israel War of 1948, Saudi Arabia sent a contingent that fought under the Egyptian command against Israel (United States Department of State, n.d.). Other Arab armies that fought Israel in 1948 were from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

In the last 75 years, five major wars have defined Arab-Israeli hostile relations, significantly wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982. The 1948 war was brought to an end, with “individual armistice agreements between Israel and the four Arab countries” (aljazeera.com, Dec 9, 2003). Since July 1949, when an armistice agreement was finally forged between Israel and Arab states, a frozen relations had existed between the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

More profoundly, Saudi Arabia has conditioned its normal diplomatic relations with Israel on Palestinian statehood. Nevertheless, for the Saudi kingdom’s national interest, it has engaged in covert deals with Israel during the period of its overt support for the Palestinian cause. Some believe that covert cooperation between the Saudis and Israelis dates back to the early 1960s, when both countries “supported the Royalists in Yemen against the Egyptian and Soviet-backed Republican government in Sana’a” (Riedel, 2022). Indeed, the intelligence services of the two countries “coordinated the delivery of weapons and expertise to the Royalists,” based in Saudi Arabia (Riedel, 2022). In the current period, specifically since 2015, a number of issues of vital interest compelled the secret friendship between the two to be growing, which include the Iran and its allies like Hezbollah and the Houthis, forming the common foe for both. In particular, the Iran nuclear threat is of grave concern for both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In July 2022, US President Joe Biden paid a state visit to the Middle East on a broad mandate. In the words of the president, “This trip is about once again positioning America in this region for the future. We are not going to leave a vacuum in the Middle East for Russia or China to fill” (White House Briefing Room Speeches Remarks, July 15, 2022). President Biden made allusion to many months of “quiet diplomacy” that preceded his visit. He remarked areas of achievement during the visit, one of which was opening of airspace between Saudi kingdom and Israel. He characterized it not only symbolically, but

substantively, as ‘a big deal’. In his words, “It means Saudi airspace is now open to flights to and from Israel. This is the first tangible step in the path of what I hope will eventually be a broader normalization of relations” (White House Briefing Room Speeches Remarks, July 15, 2022).

In spite of this optimistic note, the kingdom of Saudi reminded President Biden that solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a necessary condition to stabilize the region. But stabilizing the region to be hinged on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alone may not suffice for Saudi. In a diplomatic push, Saudi Arabia has gone ahead to normalize relations with one of its hegemonic rivals in the region, Iran, in a deal brokered by China, March 10, 2023, confining US on the side-lines (The New YorkTimes, March 11, 2023). This was in the face of the yet unresolved Iranian nuclear deal, which is making both Saudi Kingdom and the State of Israel threatened.

Comparatively, Israel and Saudi Arabia differ in their nature and form of government. Israel is a parliamentary democracy, consisting of legislative, executive and judicial branches. Its institutions are the Presidency, the Knesset (parliament), the Government, the Judiciary, and regular elections. The system is based on the principle of separation of powers, with checks and balances, in which the Executive is subject to the confidence of the Legislative and the independence of the Judiciary is guaranteed by the Constitution (<https://embassies.gov.il...>). By contrast, Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, along Islamic lines, where the king is both the head of state and government. It is hereditary along the royal lineage. Decisions are, to a large extent, made on the basis of consultation among the King, the Council of Ministers, and the country’s *ulamas* and other traditional elites (<https://globaleedge.msu.edu/countries/saudi-arabia/government>).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The neorealist and neoliberal theoretical perspectives are adopted as framework of analysis. These theorists broadly examine a wide range of global issues relating to conflict and cooperation, in a post-Cold War world in early 1990s. These two variants of classical realism and liberalism agree that cooperation in economic and security issues are key to the survival of states (Baldwin,1993).¹ This explains the driving forces of the politics of the Middle East, in particular the Saudi-Israeli relations. To validate these theoretical perspectives, data were garnered from both primary and secondary sources, made up of interview, and from

¹ <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/neorealism-and-neoliberalism/9780231084413>. Accessed April 22, 2023.

government official documents (websites) and independent mediascape.

BARRIERS TO NORMALIZATION OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

In modern times, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been simmering since 1948, defiling several peace talks. In 2002, however, the then Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud, presented his peace deal at the Arab League summit in Beirut, Lebanon. The plan was adopted by the Arab League member states, which many believe to be “still valid” to the present time (Svetlova, 2020).

The Jeddah Communique jointly issued by the United States and Saudi Arabia during U.S. President Biden's meetings with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, stated:

Regarding Israel-Palestinian issues, the two sides underscored their enduring commitment to a two-state solution, wherein a sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state lives side-by-side in peace and security with Israel, as the only way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in accordance with the internationally-recognized parameters and the Arab Peace Initiative. The leaders noted their determination to remain closely coordinated on efforts to encourage the parties to demonstrate – through policies and actions – their commitment to a two-state solution. The United States and Saudi Arabia welcomed all efforts that contribute to reaching a just and comprehensive peace in the region (The White House, Briefing Room, July 15, 2022)

According to the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel Al-Jubeir, “That remains our position” (Times of Israel, October 5, 2022). In other words, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and subsequently establishing a Palestinian state is the uncompromising position of Saudi Arabia.

Fundamentally, the Initiative places demand on Israel to concede to full withdrawal to pre-a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as the capital (Ben-Meir, 2009). These are concrete barriers to any quick resolution to the conflict, in particular refugee return and the question of Jerusalem. Moreover, as Saudi Arabia ties normalization of relations with Israel to the Palestinian statehood, so also Israel wants establishing relations with the entire Arab world to the settlement of the conflict. Removing these barriers would require rigorous negotiations, concessions and compromises from both sides. It is therefore not surprising that any meaningful peace talk had stalled since 2014 and remained grounded.

AREAS OF COOPERATION

Although Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have formal diplomatic relations, however, “clandestine ties have strengthened in recent years” (Riedel, 2022) as the two countries have to interact in a number of issues of common interest. Also, it is widely acknowledged that Riyadh and Jerusalem have security and defence relations, handled at the level of their respective foreign intelligence agencies (Bunzel & Haykel, 2023). Thus, the issues involved in their secret relations include trade, technology and security matters.

Trade

Of significance, for more cooperation in future is the opening up of the Saudi air space to Israel. During his visit, from Israel President Biden flew directly to Saudi Arabia, the first official such-flight in history, where ‘the Saudi government announced that it will allow overflight rights to all carriers, including Israeli airlines’ (Barron, Hamasaeed, Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, Michael Yaffe, & Youssef, 2022). This opening up of the airspace will increase trade and commerce between the two countries.

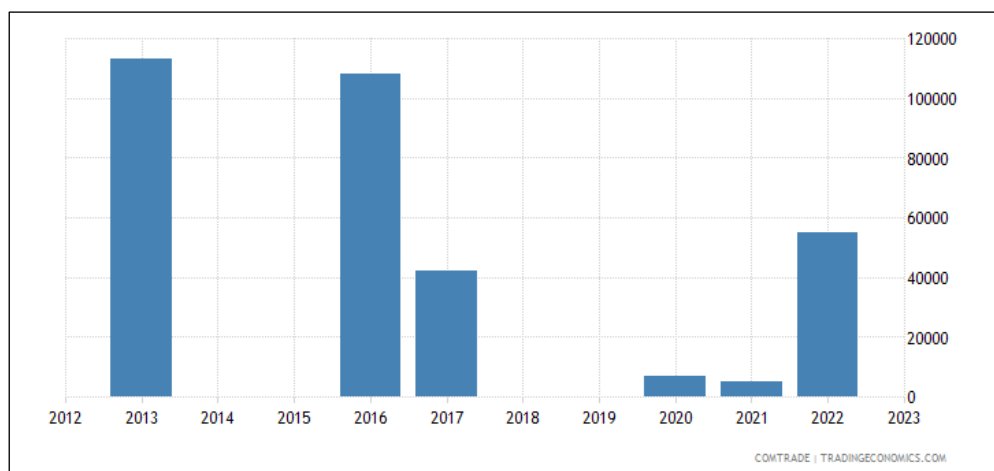


Figure 1: Israel Exports to Saudi Arabia

Source: Trading Economics (2023)

Table 1: Israel Exports to Saudi Arabia²

Israel Exports to Saudi Arabia	Value	Year
Stone, plaster, cement, asbestos, mica or similar materials	\$30K	2022
Organic chemicals	\$25K	2022
Machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers	\$5K	2021
Animal, vegetable fats and oils, cleavage products	\$7K	2020
Coffee, tea, mate and spices	\$59K	2016
Electrical, electronic equipment	\$70K	2013
Pearls, precious stones, metals, coins	\$23K	2013
Optical, photo, technical, medical apparatus	\$19K	2013
Essential oils, perfumes, cosmetics, toiletries	\$1000	2013
Articles of apparel, not knit or crocheted	\$12K	2012
Rubbers	\$3K	2012
Furniture, lighting signs, prefabricated buildings	\$2K	2012
Apparel, knit or crocheted	\$8K	2011
Paper and paperboard, articles of pulp, paper and board	\$144K	2010
Printed books, newspapers, pictures	\$18K	2010

Source: Trading Economics (2023)

Israeli state officials themselves estimate immediate benefits upwards of \$45bn, that would accrue from Israeli airlines flying over the airspace of Gulf States without trade restrictions. Reportedly, the two countries have already been negotiating undisclosed trade deals, including telecommunication (Emad Mekay, IBA Middle East Correspondent, n.d).

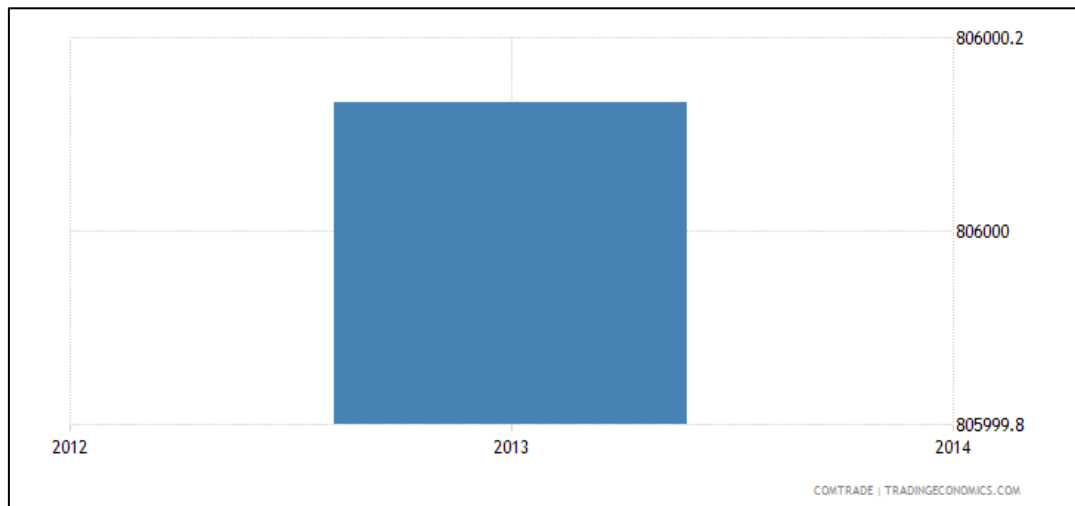


Figure 2: Israel Imports from Saudi Arabia

Table 2: Israel Imports from Saudi Arabia

Israel Imports from Saudi Arabia ³	Value	Year
Plastics	\$456K	2013
Glass and glassware	\$298K	2013
Vehicles other than railway, tramway	\$41K	2013
Clocks and watches	\$11K	2013
Machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers	\$34K	2012
Electrical, electronic equipment	\$2K	2012
Printed books, newspapers, pictures	\$1000	2012
Furniture, lighting signs, prefabricated buildings	\$6K	2011
Other made textile articles, sets, worn clothing	\$4K	2011
Organic chemicals	\$55K	2010

²Israel Exports to Saudi Arabia” <https://tradingeconomics.com/israel/exports/saudi-arabia>. Accessed April 19,2023.

³ <https://tradingeconomics.com/israel/imports/saudi-arabia>. Accessed April 20, 2023

Israel	Last	Previous	Highest	Lowest	Unit	
Balance of Trade	-2604.10	-3279.60	113.80	-5209.90	USD Million	[+]
Current Account	5251.40	4681.80	7159.70	-1750.20	USD Million	[+]
Current Account to GDP	2.50	4.70	5.50	-8.40	percent of GDP	[+]
Imports	7744.10	8253.80	10372.30	33.10	USD Million	[+]
Exports	5140.00	4974.20	6236.20	10.80	USD Million	[+]
External Debt	152997.70	154427.00	163848.50	18963.00	USD Million	[+]
Terms of Trade	86.58	84.04	120.76	84.04	points	[+]
Capital Flows	284.30	-136.50	12132.60	-8989.80	USD Million	[+]
Foreign Direct Investment	121767.80	114302.90	121767.80	-10028.10	USD Million	[+]
Remittances	1460.60	1501.00	1779.50	46.60	USD Million	[+]
Tourist Arrivals	351.90	307.00	485.75	0.60	Thousand	[+]
Crude Oil Production	0.00	0.00	0.39	0.00	BBL/D/1K	[+]
Terrorism Index	4.78	4.96	6.86	4.78	Points	[+]
Weapons Sales	831.00	543.00	1463.00	4.00	SIPRI TIV Million	[+]

Source: Trading Economics (2023)

With the renewed hope of more open relations, even though short of diplomatic relations, it is estimated that the volume of trade will increase with higher flow of Saudi exports to Israel, more than as indicated in Table 2.

Technological Cooperation

Israel is a high-tech first world nation and this can be attested to by its cutting-edge technological advances. And a similar claim can be made for some Arab states like Saudi and the Emirates. There is an high-tech project, a fibre-optic submarine cable being projected as "revolutionary" in the industry. It is revolutionary because it would be the first cable to run terrestrially across the Arabian Peninsula' from Ras al Khair on the Gulf to Amman, and then onto Israel (Middle East Eye, April 3, 2023). Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are directly and indirectly connected with the project. *The Middle East Eye* reveals "a major Israeli investment fund is backing a project 'gaining traction' in Saudi Arabia to build a fibre-optic cable that would link the two countries and other Gulf states." Also, it is being backed by the Saudi-based Gulf Cooperation Council Interconnection Authority (GCCIA), jointly owned by the six GCC member states, and aims to "build a cross-border power grid for the region" (Middle East Eye, April 3, 2023).

This internet cable project, known as the Trans Europe Asia System (TEAS), apparently is the first piece of infrastructure directly connecting Israel to the Saudi kingdom. According to the industry insiders, "the project had only become feasible in the wake of the September 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalised diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain" (Middle East Eye, April 3, 2023). Saudi is "quietly" involved in the TEAS project, along with Israel, which promises to deepen relations between the two countries. A number of other great powers are involved in the project, including the US, Britain, France, and India.

Beyond government-to-government dealings, "Israel's technological superiority has given it a regional power" status, as "Israeli companies operate" in many Arab countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel (The New Arab Staff, July 14, 2022). Specifically for Saudi Arabia, with its Vision 2030 to accelerate the kingdom's development goals, an Israeli firm is in the saddle. According to mediascape in the region, an Israeli technological company helped Saudi Arabia to define elements of its Vision 2030 (The New Arab Staff, July 14, 2022).

Part of the objectives of Vision 2030 is to 'promote a softer and less conservative image of the kingdom.' To achieve this goal, an Israeli company, *IntuView*, with expertise in "artificial intuition", provided its services to Riyadh and its ambitious economic 2030 plan. According to the company's founder and chief executive officer, Dr Shmuel Bar, *IntuView* examined data related to Saudi Arabia allowing women to drive, after "women had been prohibited from doing so for decades", purportedly for greater openness of the kingdom to outside world. And, also, a shifting believes in women empowerment.

In September 2017, a royal decree granted women the right to drive and obtain driving licences. The freedom to drive has not only changed lives by giving women greater right. For some, it has become a means of livelihood and economic empowerment. As a *Bloomberg Economics* report indicated, the decision could add up to \$90 billion to the kingdom's economy by 2030 (The National News, June 24, 2021).

Women across Saudi Arabia have celebrated the freedom to drive with so much enthusiasm. As Hala Mohammed, a Saudi citizen and resident of Jeddah, voiced to *The National*: "Driving has completely changed my life. I feel like I am in charge of my life and I am grateful every day for this freedom. It is hard for me to imagine how we lived for all these years

without this basic right" (The National News, June 24, 2021).

The more the kingdom opens up and engage in viable diplomatic relations, greater its opportunity to achieve its vision for development and security. Bar opines that companies are providing services in technology alongside cyber and national security to "enhance stability" across the region. He affirms that "Technological normalisation" is preceding "diplomatic normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia" (The New Arab Staff, July 14, 2022). In essence, all hands must be on deck, both public and private organizations, to promote peaceful coexistence between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region.

Security Calculus

National security, for Saudi Arabia and Israel, and, indeed, for every nation, is a vital national interest that must be given priority and defended at all cost. That is the reality of the *realist* several assumptions. One of these assumes that 'If all states seek to maximize power, stability will result from maintaining a balance of power, lubricated by fluid alliance systems.' In the security calculus of either Saudi Arabia, Israel, or Iran, and, indeed, the security architecture of the Middle East, the relative stability of the region will largely depend on "balance of power", resulting from fluid alliances within the region.

Alliance could exist between Saudi and Iran; between Saudi and Israel; between Saudi and UAE; between Saudi, UAE and Iran; Saudi, UAE and Israel. Balance of power assumes that no one single power or group of powers should be strong enough to exert hegemonic preponderance over the others. While allies might increase a state's ability to defend itself, however their loyalty and reliability should not be taken for granted. Because allies could turn the heat against each other in the rare incidence in which interest become incongruent and at variance.

The alliance that is apparently being fostered between Saudi and Iran should not deter the quest towards normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi and Israel. The restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi and Iran has not removed the threat that nuclear-armed-Iran poses to the region and the world. Therefore, it is imperative to assiduously work to strengthen the security concerns between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Wall Street Journal, of Thursday, March 9, 2023, reported that "Saudi Arabia says it will normalize ties with Israel if the United States provides it with 'security pledges' and 'helps build out its civilian nuclear program' " (Jewish News Syndicate, March 9, 2023). According to the report, these Saudi requests are perceived as daunting barriers to a deal, as most

Congress lawmakers would likely oppose those demands. Because such "security guarantees" that Saudi Arabia has asked before were "rejected" by presidents from both Democrats and Republican parties in Washington.

The rejection was premised on the U.S. and Israeli officials' apprehension that "helping Saudi Arabia with a nuclear program for nonmilitary uses could lead it to develop its own nuclear weapon and spark an arms race with Iran." (Jewish News Syndicate, March 9, 2023). Such fear may not be unfounded but it should, also, be clear that no state, faced with credible threat to its security, will mortgage its national security perpetually. Moreover, it should be understood that Saudi Arabia is not making a flagrant request because Article IV, of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of nuclear weapons (NPT), provides for international cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy (IAEA, 1998–2023). The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has an important role to play in achieving this objective, guiding any country genuinely desirous of building nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

The reality is that Saudi Arabia is an undisputed economic power in the region, and as such would naturally worry about its security. The Saudi kingdom is the largest economy in the Middle East and the 18th largest in the world. The kingdom is a founding and permanent member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It is also a member of the group of twenty richest nations (G20), with a nominal asset of \$ 1.061 trillion (2023 est.) (web.archive.org). With this heft, the Saudi kingdom cannot continue, for too long, without transmuting to a military power in a conflict-prone environment.

Arms race in the Middle East can hardly be avoidable. As Kenneth Waltz rightly argues, "power begs to be balanced" (US Monitor, 2018), while making case for "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," affirming that nuclear weapons balancing would mean stability" (Waltz, 2012). Waltz and other realists view the Middle East as facing "a two-pronged challenge to future stability based on the distribution of power" among states in the region. If the other nuclear club nations, with the existence of the NPT and economic sanctions, could not prevent Kim Jong-un's North Korea from possessing nuclear weapons capability, deterring Iran is very slim. The NPT is the core of international efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of nuclear disarmament (IAEA, 1998–2023). But that has not prevented some countries from possessing the device. Even in the face Iran-Saudi rapprochement, frankly, the Saudi kingdom need to work out its own security and, without gainsaying, with Israel. Saudi's military alliance with Israel will be a

defence-shield of no mean measure against unsusceptible and unreliable ally.

Making the Impossible Possible

What might have been considered impossible can become possible because nothing is as permanent as change. There are positive voices coming from the House of Saud. In an interview, it could be deduced that Saudi Arabians have good thoughts towards Israel. A member of the Saudi royal house says, “our father has warned us never fight Israel, because we will not win battle against Israel.” Another member of the Al Saud ruling House, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, asserts that ‘For the first time, Saudi Arabian interests and Israel are almost parallel... It’s incredible’ (Emad Mekay, IBA Middle East Correspondent, n.d). Also, it is gathered that King Salman is generally respected as “good” and “trying to reunite all of the Middle East.”

Therefore, the March 10,2023, China’s brokered peace deal and reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, might have come as a surprise to many. But it should be clear that it was a product of secret and quiet diplomacy of a goodhearted king, who desired peace not only within his domain but beyond. Given this template, strengthening relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a possibility that can culminate in the long-sought normalization of diplomatic relations between both neighbours. Tying such relations to the establishment of a Palestinian state may no longer necessarily be a precondition or sacrosanct. Because Saudi Arabia is continually evolving strategies to advance its geostrategic and geopolitical interests within the region and farther afield.

Crown Prince Muḥammad ibn Salmān ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl Sa‘ūd’s, simply called Mohammed bin Salman, (and fondly known as MBS), several public utterances have also been instructive. He was reportedly to have informed a group of Jewish leaders in Washington D.C. that “the Palestinians were not a top priority for Saudi Arabia and that his patience...was running out” with them. He has urged the Palestinians to either accept and use one of the many proposals to reach a peace deal, or be salient (Transatlantic Policy, November 30, 2022).

Moreover, Crown Prince Salman affirms that, “We don’t look at Israel as an enemy, we look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together.” “But we have to solve some issues before we get to that” (AFP, March 3, 2022). Of course, one of such issues is the unresolved conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, which he has already referred to as “not a top priority for Saudi Arabia.”

However, this does mean giving up on the Palestinian struggle for statehood. Rather, what it would

mean is that it should not be allowed to stand in the way of normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel because of the “many interests” both can benefit. This they have been doing covertly for many years. Now, Saudi Arabia is redefining who are its friends, including moving outside the US orbit to court Russian friendship, and the Iranian rapprochement. Saudi Arabia and Israel had shared concern for Iran as the key factor drawing them together, especially since 2015. But that seemed to be fading away, as both Iran and Saudi Arabia have agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations. This has rattled Israeli state officials, creating a delicate diplomatic balance for both Israel and Saudi, with craves for security and aversion for Iran’s hegemony in the region. Of course, Israel craves for its own breakthrough normalization deal with Saudi Arabia.

According to a Saudi analyst, Aziz Alghashian, even though Saudi might have “prioritized a rapprochement with Iran over an overt rapprochement with Israel,” does not mean a dead-end. He conjectures that “this doesn’t mean very quiet relations with Israel are going to cease....” Rather, the relationship of Saudi with Iran is “a variable that is part of the calculation” (Times of Israel, March 11, 2023) of the Saudi kingdom, ostensibly, to bring peace to the turbulent region. But referring to the relationship with Iran as “a variable” would suggest that such relationship may not be permanent, not constant, and subject to revisionism of some sort.

In spite the fallouts of the Saudi-Iran reengagement for the Israeli government, some experts believe that a detente would not harm Israel irreparably. Most experts assert that Saudi Arabia and Iran will remain regional rivals, even with functional diplomatic mission in each other’s capitals. Afterall, China and United States, and Russia and United States remain great power rivals with embassies in each other’s capitals.

Yoel Guzansky, an expert on the Persian Gulf at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), an Israeli-based think tank, says “If you see the Middle East as a zero-sum game, which Israel and Iran do, a diplomatic win for Iran is very bad news for Israel.” (AP News, March 11, 2023). However, he reasons that, like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia could deepen relations with Israel even while maintaining a transactional relationship with Iran. Similarly, Umar Karim, an expert on Saudi politics at the University of Birmingham, Britain, asserts that “The low-key arrangement that the Saudis have with Israel will continue.” He noted that the Israeli control of the West Bank remained more of a barrier to Saudi recognition than differences over Iran (AP News, March 11, 2023). He affirms that “The Saudi leadership is engaging in more than one way to secure its national security” (AP

News, March 11, 2023), doing so by fostering peace across the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia and Israel are two Middle Eastern countries, even though differ in their form and style of government, yet have areas of common interest. Although both have no diplomatic relations because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nevertheless, both countries have gainful areas of cooperation, which have been going on covertly. These include trade relations, technological development, and security concerns. These are areas of cooperation that can be strengthened to accentuate the possibility of formal normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Saudi kingdom, for the peace and stability of the Middle East. Saudi's ambition for a civilian nuclear program may not be out of place. It will advance the course of its clean energy program. If the US backed-down in this project, either Russia or China will back up, contradicting President Biden's standpoint of "not going to leave a vacuum in the Middle East for Russia or China to fill." And on the long run, the power rivalry in regional politics will culminate in balance of power in the region. And Saudi Arabia and Israel remain potential allies, a formidable one in balance of power calculus in the Middle East.

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