

Saudi Arabia's Balancing Game: The Palestinian Cause and Regional Leadership

by Giulia Daga and Luigi Simonelli

In the hours following Hamas's violent attack on Israel of 7 October, the Saudi authorities called for "an immediate de-escalation", while noting that they had previously warned against the outcomes of "the continued occupation and depriving Palestinians of their legitimate rights and the repeated systematic provocations against their sanctities".¹ In a more recent declaration, the Saudi Foreign Minister has reiterated the country's "categorical rejection of calls for the forced displacement of the Palestinian people from Gaza, and its condemnation of the continued targeting of defenceless civilians there".²

¹ "Escalation of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Divides Gulf Arab States", in *Amwaj.media*, 10 October 2023, <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/escalation-of-israeli-palestinian-conflict-divides-gulf-arab-states-duplicate>.

² AFP, "Saudi Condemns Displacement, Attacks on Civilians in Gaza", in *NDTV*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/israel-palestine-war-saudi-arabia-condemns>

Reportedly, the heavy retaliation measures adopted by Israel, whose bombing campaign against Gaza has been one of the most intense of this century,³ also including the apparent use of white phosphorus,⁴ resulted in

[displacement-attacks-on-civilians-in-gaza-4479936](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-airstrikes.html).

³ Patrick Kingsley, "Israel's Strikes on Gaza Are Some of the Most Intense this Century", in *The New York Times*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-airstrikes.html>.

⁴ Meg Kelly, "Israel Appears to Use White Phosphorus in Gaza, Video Shows" in *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/12/white-phosphorus-israel-gaza-strike-video/>; Human Rights Watch, *Israel: White Phosphorus Used in Gaza, Lebanon*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/node/386211>. According to Human Rights Watch, the use of white phosphorus in densely populated areas of Gaza, without respecting the principle of taking all possible precautions to avoid civilian injury, violates customary international humanitarian law, even if Israel has not ratified Protocol III of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. See the website of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs: *High Contracting Parties*

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the halt of the normalisation process between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which should have followed suit on the 2020 Abraham Accords. Only a few weeks before, on 20 September, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had announced on US television that "every day, we get closer" to an agreement with Israel.⁵ A few days later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had reiterated the same optimism in front of the United Nations General Assembly general debate, insisting that the Palestinians should not be given "a veto over new peace treaties with Arab states".⁶

The official Saudi position on Palestine

In the past decades, the question of Palestine has kept a prominent role in the official Saudi positions and has often been referred to in public speeches, in line with the tenets of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for a withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories (pre-1967 borders) and the recognition of an independent Palestine with East Jerusalem as its

and Signatories CCW, <https://disarmament.unoda.org/the-convention-on-certain-conventional-weapons/high-contracting-parties-and-signatories-ccw>.

⁵ Will Weissert, "Saudi Crown Prince Says in Rare Interview 'Every Day We Get Closer' to Normalization with Israel", in *AP News*, 21 September 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/a65f1e4c39ee2d83667aa433f59b59c8;Bret-Baier-Previews-Historic-Moments-in-First-Ever-All-English-Interview-with-Saudi-Arabia's-Crown-Prince> (video), in *Fox News*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6337512022112>.

⁶ Israel, *Statement by His Excellency Benjamin Netanyahu Prime Minister*, New York, 22 September 2023, <https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/israel>.

capital.⁷ The question of Gaza has remained central in the Saudi position. The strip has been described as a "huge prison due to the unjust blockade imposed by Israel" while Israel has often been accused of ignoring "the resolutions of international legitimacy and the Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War".⁸

Most recently, at the Jeddah summit of the Arab League in March 2023, Saudi Arabia reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestinian issue and a common Arab approach in support of a "comprehensive and just settlement" in line with international law.⁹ The summit took place shortly after the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran and welcomed back the Syrian government in the Arab League, thus showing at least outwardly a spirit of renewed efforts towards unity among the Arab and Muslim countries of the region.

⁷ Saudi Arabia, Speech by Adel Ahmed Al-Jubeir, in UN General Assembly, *Official Records of the 13th Plenary Meeting, 73th Session (A/73/PV.13)*, New York, 28 September 2018, p. 30-32, <http://undocs.org/en/A/73/PV.13>; and Speech by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, in *Official Records of the 6th Plenary Meeting, 75th Session (A/75/PV.6)*, New York, 23 September 2020, p. 23-26, <http://undocs.org/en/A/75/PV.6>.

⁸ Saudi Arabia, *Prince Saud Statement Before the Sixty-Sixth Session of the UN General Assembly* (written statement), New York, 26 September 2011, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/statements/prince-saud-statement-sixty-sixth-session-un-general-assembly>.

⁹ "Jeddah Declaration: Arab Leaders Affirm the Importance of Promoting Joint Arab Action Based on Common Foundations, Values, Interests and One Destiny", in *Saudi Press Agency*, 19 May 2023, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/47e1778aaaa>.

A long-lasting de facto cooperation with Israel

Despite the emphasis on the question of Palestine in official statements, the Kingdom has been a long-standing partner of Israel. Cooperation has been ongoing since the 1960s, as their common anti-Nasserist policy brought them closer. In 1978, in discussions with the US on the consequences of a treaty of normalisation between Egypt and Israel, the Saudi authorities did not speak vocally against it, stating that “our hope is that the treaty involving Israel, Egypt and the United States will embody something with which we can work and put to rest those anguished souls who wish to do something drastic”, without however renouncing to their support to Palestinian self-determination.¹⁰

More recently, the Arab Uprisings quickly led the interests of the two countries to intertwine, with an ensuing informal collaboration in the fields of intelligence, surveillance, cybersecurity and counter-insurgency instruments more in general, such as the NSO Group's spyware Pegasus. On the same account, common enmity and hostility towards Iran – and Hezbollah – has resulted in the two states finding themselves on the same side of the fence in the case of the JCPOA talks and the war in Lebanon, although the recent Saudi-Iranian détente, brokered

¹⁰ US Department of State, “Memorandum of Conversation, Riyadh, March 17, 1979”, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, Vol. IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978–December 1980, 2nd revised ed. 2018, p. 757, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v09Ed2/d218>.

in March 2023 by China, has to some extent altered such dynamics. Saudi Arabia exploited its renewed sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the US by advancing a few demands in exchange for normalisation, among which NATO-like US security and defence assurances and the US green light and assistance for the realisation of a national civilian nuclear programme.¹¹

This “pragmatic” approach – which often translates as the opposite of “normative” – of expressing support for Palestine's self-determination while also improving informal relations with Israel has for a long time benefited Saudi Arabia. The recent violent escalation, however, has brought up again the Palestinian question in the Saudi and regional public debate, thus raising the symbolic costs of normalisation – at least for now – both according to domestic and foreign policy considerations.

Why save the façade? Regime stability concerns

Internally, Palestinian self-determination still holds importance in the minds of the population. And even if Saudi Arabia is one of the most authoritarian states in the world and does not pay the electoral price of accountability, the regime still spends a lot of time trying to win consensus and deter anti-regime mobilisation, especially from its large young and social media-literate population.

¹¹ Riad Kahwaji, “In Nuclear Push, Saudi Arabia Could Play US, China off Each Other”, in *Breaking Defense*, 2 October 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/?p=312615>.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia is one of the most penetrated countries in the world in terms of digital technology: 96 per cent of the population uses internet, and it is among the top countries for Facebook and X usage. Overall, according to the Network Readiness Index – which measures the capacity of countries to leverage ICTs for competitiveness and well-being – Saudi Arabia is ranked 35 out of 131 countries.¹² Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular, having realised that the presence of a “youth bulge” in its kingdom may lead to protests and violent conflict, directed the effort of the Saudi propaganda machine towards social media due to their increasing role as spaces for discussion and information consumption.

One could ultimately say that such a threat represents the guiding principle for Saudi securitisation policies, aimed at pacifying and possibly repressing young Saudis, with the Al Saud dynasty continuing to exercise its domination despite some increased forms of participation.¹³ In this context, showing a moderate and justice-oriented position in the conflict between Israel and Palestine defuses possible discontent against the regime while presenting a position that does not exclude the future resumption of normalisation talks.¹⁴

¹² World Bank Data: *Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - Saudi Arabia*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=SA;Network Readiness Index 2022, https://networkreadinessindex.org/countries>.

¹³ Marc Owen Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Deception, Disinformation and Social Media*, London, Hurst, 2022.

¹⁴ “Why Saudi Arabia and the UAE Want to Keep Links with Israel”, in *The Economist*, 22 October

Palestine and the Saudi regional leadership pursuit

Historically the question of Palestine has been central to both the Arab and Muslim transnational discourses since the creation of Israel in 1948. Initially, it was strongly associated with Arab nationalism, with the bordering Arab states taking the responsibility of supporting what was still an “Arab cause” and not only Palestinian. Jamal Abdel Nasser personified this approach, and it was in this spirit that the 1956 and most importantly the 1967 wars were fought. The fall of Pan-Arabism, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the increasing weight of Saudi Arabia changed everything.

In the last four decades, both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have centred their regional strategies around Islam, though in diametrically opposed ways: the former has presented itself as the protector of monarchies, the champion of conservative Islam and moderation, the guarantor of Western relations and status quo; the latter as the protector of the oppressed, the champion of revolutionary Islam, the greatest enemy of Western interference in the Middle East.

Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) was born in 1987 out of this context of failure of Arab nationalism and Islamisation of the regional rivalries, calling for an armed struggle to free the entirety of the pre-1948

2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/10/22/are-the-abraham-accords-over>.

Palestinian land,¹⁵ therefore putting itself in stark contrast with the two-states solution advocated by the PLO and most of the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia. Conversely, the one-state position called for by Hamas – even in the diluted form of the 2017 charter¹⁶ – has brought the movement closer to the position of the Iranian Supreme leader Ali Khamenei (which has not always coincided with the official position of the Iranian government), in repeatedly calling for a referendum among all the population of Israel and Palestine to decide the future of the entire territory.¹⁷ This, in addition to the fact that Hamas was born as a wing organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood and that it supported the Brotherhood's victory in Egypt in 2011–2012, has complicated the working relations between Hamas and

the Saudi authorities, which have since strongly limited Hamas's activities in the Kingdom.¹⁸ These divergences have however not prevented Saudi Arabia to keep the channel of communication open with the organisation, as shown by the official visit to Riyadh of a Hamas delegation in April 2023.¹⁹

The question of political Islam is an exposed nerve for Saudi Arabia. Islamist factions in the Kingdom and their harsh disapproval of the rulers' behaviour and of the country's Western alignment have been constant sources of concern for the regime, especially since 1979. Saudi Arabia has intermittently balanced its loss of credibility through branding campaigns of international religious legitimation and through the funding of transnational Islamist groups.²⁰ Iran has often built on this fragile balance, accusing Saudi Arabia of being unworthy of the guardianship of the holy sites of Islam. The pitfalls of the Saudi regime's religious legitimacy have led the current Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to increasingly focus on building a nationalistic sentiment²¹ that goes

¹⁵ "Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full", in *Middle East Eye*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>; "Iran's Supreme Leader Calls for End to "Murderous" Israeli Regime" in *Reuters*, 24 July 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-palestinians-israel-iran-idUKKBN0FS2EJ20140723>.

¹⁶ The 2017 Charter, while revendicating the Palestinian right to an "integral territorial unit" from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean, and from Ras al-Naqurah in the North to Umm al-Rashrash in the South, states (art. 20) that Hamas "considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus". "Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full", cit.

¹⁷ "Iran Rejects Two-State Solution for Palestine", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 October 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/10/2/iran-rejects-two-state-solution-for-palestine>; Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Leader in a Meeting with Academia: Iran Proposes Referendum among True Palestinians*, 11 June 2018, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/36206>.

¹⁸ Ali Younes, "Dozens of Palestinians Face 'Terrorism Court' in Saudi Arabia", in *Al Jazeera*, 9 March 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/dozens-of-palestinians-face-terrorism-court-in-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁹ Ali Abbas Ahmadi, "Explainer: A Look at Hamas and Saudi Arabia's Rocky Relationship", in *The New Arab*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/node/2787901>.

²⁰ Toby Matthiesen, "The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy: Islamists and the State in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings", in *Rethinking Political Islam Working Papers*, August 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia_Matthiesen-FINALE.pdf.

²¹ Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "The New Saudi

beyond the Islamic transnational one. Despite this tendency, the Saudi Vision 2030 leadership message by both the Crown Prince and King Salman bin Abdulaziz officially states that "the first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds",²² hinting at what is often detected as a discrepancy of priorities within the Royal family.²³

A balancing game

After the attacks of 7 October by Hamas and the escalating retaliation by Israel, the Saudis have visibly balanced their actions and have reacted to events so as not to deteriorate irrevocably the relations with any of the parties involved, calling for a "fair, complete, and equitable solution to safeguard the rights of the Palestinian people",²⁴ aligning with the majority of the UN General Assembly in support of a humanitarian truce,²⁵ and announcing a contribution of 2 million euro to UNRWA in support of Palestine

Leadership and its Impact on Regional Policy", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 2021), p. 49-65, DOI 10.1080/03932729.2021.1987033.

²² Vision 2030 website: *Leadership Message*, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision-2030/leadership-message>.

²³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Saudi-Israeli Normalization and the Hamas Attack", in *Arab Center Washington DC Policy Analysis*, 11 October 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/?p=28331>.

²⁴ "Foreign Minister Makes a Phone Call with His Jordanian Counterpart", in *Saudi Press Agency*, 28 October 2023, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N1987678>.

²⁵ UN News, *UN General Assembly Adopts Gaza Resolution Calling for Immediate and Sustained 'Humanitarian Truce'*, 26 October 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142847>.

refugees.²⁶ At the same time, Riyadh has kept the door open to dialogue with the US, as it was shown by the meeting between US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.²⁷

These actions and statements are in line with the pre-7 October Saudi balancing acts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the quest for domestic legitimacy, Arab and Islamic leadership, but also for advantageous relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia has often juggled the Palestinian cause so to make the most of it. The Kingdom has increasingly presented itself as the facilitator of the peace process, by nurturing working relations with all sides while insisting on promoting a just and equitable long-term solution. In the current crisis, the halt of the negotiations for normalisation with Israel should be understood within this balancing game. The interruption has benefitted Saudi Arabia in front of the domestic and regional audience, while at the same time providing larger room of manoeuvre to the Kingdom to raise the stakes with the United States in exchange of a future resumption of negotiations once the heat of the conflict is over.

Indeed, the smoothest way for Saudi Arabia to go on with normalising

²⁶ UNRWA, *Saudi Arabia Announces US\$ 2 Million Contribution to UNRWA in Support of Palestine Refugees*, 16 October 2023, <https://www.unrwa.org/node/45497>.

²⁷ Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken Says Arab States Don't Want Spillover from Israel-Hamas Conflict", in *Reuters*, 15 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-will-meet-with-saudi-crown-prince-sunday-riyadh-us-official-says-2023-10-15>.

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relations with Israel is if the Palestinian question is not high on the international agenda, and most importantly out of the eyesight of social-media omnipresent Saudi and regional population. After all, the Kingdom was already enjoying the fruits of a *de facto* normalisation, thus making the interruption of negotiations an easy decision in terms of cost/opportunity calculations.

The losers in this game remain the Palestinian people and the possibility of having regional backers that support a fair and long-lasting solution beyond their calculations. While attention is often focused on the inconsistency and double standards of the West in their positions, the Middle East actors, and Saudi Arabia above all, which are always seen as promptly backing the Palestinian cause when the confrontation reaches new peaks of violence, should be equally held accountable for the lack of resolve towards a just, international law-driven, solution.

3 November 2023

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