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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**AGAINST THE GRAIN: SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL'S
WARMING RELATIONS**

by

Rachel O. Carter

September 2021

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**AGAINST THE GRAIN: SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL'S WARMING
RELATIONS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia and Israel have never had formal diplomatic relations. The Arab-Israeli issue of Palestinian self-determination, above all else, has kept these two Middle East states apart and at times in adversarial tension. However, the 21st century has witnessed thawing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, despite the continued unpopularity of Israel within Saudi society. Scholars have largely isolated one or two of the primary drivers that promote or inhibit Saudi's desire to cooperate with Israel—mutual concern with Iran, Saudi reform initiatives, and U.S. influence—without analyzing how the factors work in tandem to promote or inhibit cooperation as a whole. This thesis examines how those drivers interact to provide a more holistic understanding of why Saudi Arabia would cooperate with Israel, and the implications of those drivers on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. This thesis concludes that in the present configuration, the drivers of Saudi's cooperation initiatives with Israel collectively have not stimulated a viable path to normalization of relations that circumvents the barrier of Palestinian self-determination. This thesis also concludes that this barrier is predominantly the result of Saudi Arab tradition and not borne out of religion. Saudi Arabia and Israel will continue to cooperate towards mutually beneficial opportunities short of normalization for as long as the strategic context of their relationship endures.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabia and Israel have never had formal diplomatic relations. The Arab-Israeli issue of Palestinian self-determination, above all else, has kept these two Middle East states apart and at times in adversarial tension. Israel's very existence has long been criticized by its neighboring Muslim Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia. However, the 21st century has witnessed thawing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi Arabia has increased cooperation with a country that many of its people and allies view as an enemy of Islam and the Arab people. Why would Saudi Arabia potentially jeopardize its own legitimacy by cooperating with Israel?

Additionally, between September and October 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Sudan signed landmark initiatives under the Abraham Accords for full normalization with Israel. However, these normalization agreements focused international attention on the historic tension associated with Arab states establishing relations with Israel. Since Israel's inception in 1948, the legitimacy of its existence has been contested by its predominantly Muslim Arab neighboring countries. The contention emerges from Israel's policies toward Palestinians and occupation of Palestinian territory, including the holy city of Jerusalem. After decades of exchanging harsh rhetoric and Israel's human rights record against Palestinians, it is strange that three Arab countries signed normalization initiatives with Israel without Israel conceding territory to the Palestinians or shared custody of the holy sites. Immediately following the signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords, media outlets rationalized the normalization agreements through explanations of Arab countries balancing their military power against Iran, as well as allegations of the United States bribing signatories with advanced military technology.¹ The media then highlighted that Saudi Arabia could be next to normalize.

¹ Neri Zilber, "Peace for Warplanes?," *Foreign Policy* (blog), August 31, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/31/israel-uae-peace-deal-f-35-arms-sales-palestine/>; Jonathan Hoffman, "Analysis ; Why Gulf Nations Are Normalizing Ties with Israel," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/24/why-gulf-nations-are-normalizing-ties-with-israel/>.

My thesis examines what factors have kept Saudi Arabia and Israel from officially normalizing relations, investigates what has driven Saudi Arabia's evolving relationship and increased cooperation initiatives and with Israel since 2001, and briefly explores the feasibility of a potential normalization agreement between the two countries in the future. While there has been significant research into Saudi and Israel's evolving relationship over time, scholars have largely isolated one or two of the factors that promote or inhibit cooperation without analyzing how the factors work in tandem to promote or inhibit cooperation. This thesis seeks to rigorously examine how those factors interact for a more holistic understanding of what Saudi Arabia and Israel's relationship hinges on now and in the future. This thesis will not argue whether or not Saudi and Israel will normalize relations in the future, but instead will look at how Saudi's increased cooperation and diplomacy with Israel in the 21st century is a balancing act for Saudi Arabia to further its security interests while maintaining its religious and political legitimacy within Arab societies and the wider Muslim world.

B. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

After decades of animosity, why has Saudi Arabia increased diplomatic negotiations and cooperation with Israel? Does this increased strategic cooperation signal a viable pathway to official normalization of relations in the future?

C. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Middle East continues to play a pivotal role in United States foreign policy, and Saudi Arabia and Israel endure as major U.S. partners in the region. However, we typically work with them bilaterally, and separate lines of effort between Saudi Arabia and Israel. If there are shifting balances of power, especially between these two unexpected countries that are both strong partners of the United States, analysts need to grasp what the evolving relationship hinges on. Analysts then need to clearly articulate that new dynamic to civilian and military decisionmakers to appropriately inform U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Furthermore, shifting dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Israel also illuminate what U.S. actions in the region could derail our foreign policy initiatives. Our actions and inactions in the region have consequences. Perhaps instead of partnering with Saudi Arabia

and Israel separately, there is an opportunity for a stronger and clearer multilateral effort against common security considerations.

D. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Saudi Arabia and Israel's warming relations during the 21st century focuses on three causal mechanisms: mutual concern with Iran, Saudi's secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence. Scholars agree that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the largest impediment to full normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. However, they diverge on whether or not normalization is even possible in light of the unsettled Palestinian issue. This literature review explores the impact of all three separate causal mechanisms on cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as how scholars diverge on the feasibility of Saudi Arabia and Israel establishing full normalization in the future without Palestinian self-determination.

1. Palestinian Self-Determination

Since 1948, Saudi Arabia and Israel have maintained a pragmatic, yet strained relationship. The Palestinian issue has divided them, and Saudi Arabia has at times communicated its support to the Palestinian cause through harsh rhetoric and criticism of Israeli policies.² Saudi avoided direct involvement during the Arab-Israeli wars, but has played a leading regional role and promoted proactive policies aimed at resolving the crisis since the early 1980s.³ In brokering the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) between Israel and Palestine, Saudi made a significant step in recognizing Israel's security concerns emanating from the Palestinian population. However, its official requirement for Palestinian self-determination as a pre-requisite to normalization with Israel endures.⁴

² Elie Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 584, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.3751/72.4.12>.

³ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 584.

⁴ Podeh, 585.

2. Mutual Iranian Threat

While the Palestinian issue divides Saudi Arabia and Israel, their mutual concerns over Iran's regional hegemonic aspirations have brought them closer together.⁵ Scholars largely accept that shared concern about Iran is the primary driver of cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Jacob Abadi emphasizes Saudi Arabia's pragmatic approach to Israel, and Elie Podeh frames the relationship as a realist "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" paradigm.⁶ Abadi explains that as Iranian influence penetrated Lebanon and encouraged Hamas in Gaza in the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia recognized Iran's threat to its regional interests and traded confrontation for engagement with Israel.⁷ Despite Saudi Arabia and Israel's history of hostility and distrust, Iran's regional hegemonic aspirations have fostered cooperation between the two countries.⁸ Jonathan Rynhold and Michal Yaari similarly note that Saudi and Israel's mutual alarm over the Iranian threat has increased as Iran's military and political power has increased.⁹

Rynhold and Yaari also point to the concern over Iran's possible future development of nuclear weapons as a point of convergence between Saudi Arabia and Israel.¹⁰ Jones and Guzansky support this idea by referencing Saudi Arabia and Israel's mutual objection to the 2015 nuclear deal that allowed Iran to fund its nuclear program through international donations while using its own resources to sustain regional proxy militia forces.¹¹ Abadi also notes that despite failed Arab-Israeli peace negotiations in 2002 and 2009, Saudi Arabia nevertheless maintained close contact with Israel out of concern

⁵ Jacob Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1509853>

⁶ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 433; Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 585.

⁷ Abadi, 443.

⁸ Abadi, 433.

⁹ Jonathan Rynhold and Michal Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," *Mediterranean Politics*, December 6, 2019, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1699267>

¹⁰ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," *Mediterranean Politics*, December 6, 2019, 2.

¹¹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 398–99, 411.

for Iran's growing nuclear program.¹² Abadi, Rynhold, and Yaari further point to the Saudi funding of Israeli intelligence operations against the Iranian nuclear program in 2012, as well as military sales and overflight permissions as evidence of upgraded Saudi-Israeli cooperation against Iran.¹³

Lastly, scholars convey Saudi Arabia and Israel's growing antipathy toward Iran and its Shia surrogates during the fallout of the 2003 Iraq War, the 2006 Israel-Hizballah War, and the Arab Spring as a reason for their warming relations.¹⁴ Resulting security vacuums fostered Gulf State fears of a Shia crescent comprising Iran-backed non-state actors and fostered Saudi's benign attitude towards Israel.¹⁵ Rynhold and Yaari claim that Saudi views proxy conflicts within Arab states as a hegemonic rivalry between Saudi-backed blocs and Iranian-backed blocs, perceiving Iranian blocs as gaining influence at the expense of Saudi's Sunni allies.¹⁶ Israel converges with Saudi in recognizing the growing threat posed by the increased magnitude and proximity of Iran and its proxies in these countries.¹⁷

3. Secular Reform Initiatives

Saudi Arabia wants to modernize and shed its hyper-conservative reputation.¹⁸ Jones and Guzansky attribute Saudi's fear of Iran's revolutionary influence and sensitivity to its reputation as an extremist incubator following 9/11 to Riyadh's promotion of a more moderate Saudi State.¹⁹ Rynhold and Yaari convey that the rise of Salafist Sunni groups and the Muslim Brotherhood following the Arab Spring brought Saudi Arabia and Israel

¹² Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 443.

¹³ Abadi, 443–44; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

¹⁴ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 405, 411; Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 564.

¹⁵ Jones and Guzansky, 405–406; Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 575.

¹⁶ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

¹⁷ Rynhold and Yaari, 2.

¹⁸ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 406; Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020), xiv.

¹⁹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 406.

closer, especially as the uprisings deprived Saudi Arabia of its powerful Egyptian ally.²⁰ Since 2009, Riyadh has openly supported a range of nonstate actors to counter Sunni extremists and Iranian-sponsored proxy groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.²¹

Furthermore, Rynhold and Yaari, as well as Guzansky credit the personal role of Saudi Crown, Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), as crucial in driving secular reform initiatives and cooperation initiatives with Israel.²² MBS has diverged from his father's more traditional views set forth in the Arab Peace Initiative.²³ Guzansky further contends that cooperation efforts with Israel match MBS's efforts to market moderate Islam as part of Saudi's reform initiatives.²⁴ Guzansky further remarks that the likelihood of additional cooperation with Israel will increase in the event of King Salman's death and MBS's succession.²⁵ However, MBS is cognizant of the impact of pushing for diplomacy with Israel on his impending appointment, as well as Saudi elite influence on both issues.²⁶ Conversely, Rynhold and Yaari uphold that any potential future decline in MBS's authority, or an overthrow of the Saud regime would severely degrade Saudi-Israeli rapprochement initiatives.²⁷

Rynhold and Yaari further claim that transnational Arab-Muslim identities are weakening the emphasis on the Palestinian issue, which lowers political and religious barriers to Saudi Arabia's cooperation with Israel.²⁸ Showcasing a growing fatigue with the Palestinian cause, Palestinian leadership fracturing and extremist ties, Iran poses more

²⁰ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 3.

²¹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 411.

²² Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 3; Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel," *Institute for National Security Studies*, no. 1396 (October 2020): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27809>.

²³ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 3–4; Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel," 2.

²⁴ Guzansky, 4.

²⁵ Guzansky, 2, 4.

²⁶ Guzansky, 2.

²⁷ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 8.

²⁸ Rynhold and Yaari, 4,6.

of a security threat to Saudi Arabia than the Palestinian issue.²⁹ Rynhold and Yaari characterize the last decade of Saudi-Israeli relations as a “quiet revolution,” that has “creat[ed] elbow room, in terms of domestic legitimacy and regime security, for the Saudi regime to take steps to develop relations with Israel.”³⁰ Jones and Guzansky support this claim by contending that Saudi’s anti-Israel stance had as much to do with demonstrating a strong anti-Israel stance amongst Arab-Muslim peers as it did in advancing the Palestinian cause.³¹

4. U.S. Influence (or Lack Thereof)

The United States and Saudi Arabia maintain a close relationship founded on a 1945 agreement for the United States to protect Saudi Arabia from external attacks in exchange for access to Saudi oil.³² In parallel, America recognized the formation of Israel in 1948 and developed an enduring relationship over the decades, strengthened by military and economic cooperation.³³ However, the U.S. preoccupation with its military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq since the early 2000s, and the resulting U.S. disinclination towards additional military engagements in the Middle East perpetuated Gulf state fears that the United States could not guarantee their security against Iran.³⁴ U.S. pressure for the Saudi regime to move towards negotiations with the Jewish state, as well as the absence of U.S. willingness to counter Iran further drives Saudi Arabia towards cooperation with Israel. Abadi contends that the United States has historically moderated Saudi Arabia’s policies and deterred hostile aggression towards Israel due to Saudi’s desire to protect its longstanding relationship with the United States—its primary petroleum export client and supplier of sophisticated weapons systems.³⁵ Guzansky claims that U.S. weapons exports

²⁹ Rynhold and Yaari, 2.

³⁰ Rynhold and Yaari, 1, 4, 6.

³¹ Jones and Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States,” 405.

³² Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 6.

³³ Charles Lipson, “American Support for Israel: History, Sources, Limits,” *Israel Affairs* 2, no. 3–4 (March 1996): 128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537129608719397>

³⁴ Jones and Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States,” 407.

³⁵ Abadi, “Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives,” 445–446.

to Saudi Arabia is a favorable factor in increasing Saudi Arabia's cooperation with Israel.³⁶ However, Jones and Guzansky, as well as Rynhold and Yaari note that Israel is particularly concerned with its military advantage in future U.S. arms sales (specifically nuclear technology) to Saudi Arabia.³⁷

Additionally, scholars contend that Saudi and Israel base their regional security strategies on the U.S. willingness and ability to project strategic leadership across the region, and more importantly, when the United States is unwilling or unable to do so.³⁸ Shared disdain over the Obama administration's handling of Iran and its nuclear program, its abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and overall U.S. retrenchment caused Saudi Arabia and Israel to question the reliability of the United States as a long-standing patron.³⁹ While the Trump administration improved relations with Saudi Arabia, it is unclear how a new Biden administration will alter this dynamic. In the absence of the United States or traditional Arab partners, Rynhold and Yaari contend that Israel's political and military efforts to counter Iran have decisively altered Saudi Arabia's foreign policy on Israel.⁴⁰

In the absence of viable partners, Saudi Arabia and Israel have formed what Jones and Guzansky call a tacit security regime (TSR) to further their hard power interests.⁴¹ The definition of TSR remains contested within scholarship as geostrategic interests and ideational factors determine the exact relationship between the involved actors. However, Jones and Guzansky define the concept of TSR as "how adversaries—who would otherwise normally eschew more formal means of diplomatic exchange—manage their relations through a series of informal agreements and understandings, where despite being unwritten and not codified, rules and boundaries in pursuit of wider shared interests are

³⁶ Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel," 5.

³⁷ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 8; Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 414.

³⁸ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 399; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

³⁹ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 3.

⁴⁰ Rynhold and Yaari, 2–3.

⁴¹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 399.

readily understood.”⁴² Jones and Guzansky surmise that Saudi antipathy towards Israel endures amongst influential Saudis and the TSR between Saudi and Israel has boundaries that prevent a deeper and more permanent relationship. However, the TSR between Saudi and Israel continues to sidestep the intractable issue of Palestinian statehood and fluidly adapts to changes that domestic ideational context dictates.⁴³

5. Prospect of Normalization

While most scholars recognize the political difficulties in Saudi Arabia and Israel establishing official normalization, there is a divergence in the literature on its feasibility. Abadi and Podeh reject the notion that Saudi Arabia would ever pursue normalization before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is settled. In line with traditional scholarship on the issue, Abadi and Podeh predict that Saudi Arabia will not openly normalize with Israel prior to a solution (or at least significant progress towards a solution) in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁴ Despite unprecedented levels of military cooperation and commercial transactions between Saudi Arabia and Israel, Abadi and Podeh suggest that Palestinian self-determination is a fundamental and unchanged tenet of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy toward Israel.⁴⁵ The latter scholars acknowledge Saudi’s seemingly intractable demands for Palestinian self-determination, coupled with Israel’s disinclination to negotiate with a weak Palestinian leadership.⁴⁶ However, they offer evidence of subtle changes within Saudi leadership and domestic public opinion that could at the very least change the parameters of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

A different view has been advanced by Jones and Guzansky, as well as Rynhold and Yaari. These scholars are more optimistic about the question of potential

⁴² Jones and Guzansky, 399.

⁴³ Jones and Guzansky, 399, 403, 410, 412, 414.

⁴⁴ Abadi, “Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives,” 446; Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018,” 585.

⁴⁵ Abadi, “Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives,” 433, 442, 446; Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018,” 585.

⁴⁶ Jones and Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States,” 413; Rynhold and Yaari, “The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations,” 7–8.

normalization, stressing a qualitative shift and greater sensitivity in Riyadh's recognition of the of the Jewish state's legitimacy and its security concerns.⁴⁷ Influential Saudis have become more open in their dealings with Israel and demonstrated "thinly veiled support" for Israel's response to Palestinian activities.⁴⁸ Guzansky recognizes Saudi Arabia's various internal and external sensitivities and restraints to normalization based on maintaining internal stability and regional preeminence. He further acknowledges that full normalization may be one step too far for the kingdom, but sees Saudi preparing its domestic population through what he coins as "creeping normalization."⁴⁹ Guzansky admits that the price of normalization for Saudi Arabia is higher than its Gulf neighbors and it is unclear what conditions would allow for Saudi to sign an Abraham Accords style agreement.⁵⁰ However, he also notes that Saudi intolerance towards Israel and its Jewish population emanates primarily from Saudis in exile that oppose the regime, whereas resident opinion is less clear due to censorship.⁵¹ Guzansky offers that Saudi's support for the Abraham Accords (short of its own signing) and its increasingly positive state-owned media coverage of Israel show how far Saudi Arabia has deviated from its historical antipathy towards Israel.⁵² Saudi may exercise a more flexible approach in what defines a resolution, and is no longer muting its criticism against Palestinian leadership and responsibility in a failed Arab-Israeli peace.⁵³ Jones and Guzansky conclude that ideological barriers make the TSR paradigm more viable for the foreseeable future and there is promise in the TSR's confidence-building measures towards normalization.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 413; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 1,6.

⁴⁸ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 410-11.

⁴⁹ Guzansky, 1.

⁵⁰ Guzansky, 1.

⁵¹ Guzansky, 3.

⁵² Guzansky, 1.

⁵³ Guzansky, 1-2.

⁵⁴ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 414.

E. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND QUESTIONS EXPLORED

This thesis seeks to explore why Saudi Arabia and Israel have ostensibly abandoned their historical animosities towards one another in exchange for increasing diplomacy and cooperation in the 21st century. Are we witnessing a political maturation of Saudi Arabia that overlooks political and religious indifferences with Israel for a greater cause? Is the United States failing to protect Saudi Arabia's security interests and being replaced by a stronger guarantor in a realist self-help world? Does the Arab world believe that we brokered normalization in exchange for airplanes under the last presidential administration, and what does that signal to them in terms of our intentions in the region? More importantly, does a change to that deal under a new administration make us look weak and unreliable as a partner? Furthermore, it will briefly examine factors and trend lines that could suggest the possibility of Saudi Arabia and Israel reaching full normalization of relations without first settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. Based on a review of the literature, there are three causal mechanisms that advance cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel: mutual concern over Iran, Saudi's secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence.

This thesis seeks to explore how all three mechanisms interact to fuel increased cooperation between the two countries, but why they have fallen short of full normalization. This thesis will also briefly examine the shifting factors in Saudi domestic politics which could prepare the ground for the potential normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations at some point in the next five years without there being any sort of resolution to the question of Palestinian self-determination. Whichever path Saudi Arabia ultimately takes, it is likely that its policies will have to carefully balance any relationship with Israel with the potential consequences that improving ties could have on its domestic political situation and its broader legitimacy within the greater Muslim world.

F. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis conducts a case study of Saudi Arabia and Israel's warming relations from 2001 to the present. The timeframe was chosen to showcase the impact of increased U.S. involvement in the region, a surge of radical religious extremism, and Saudi Arabia's recent move away from puritanical Salafism and greater support for religious moderation

under MBS. Additionally, in the conclusion, it will briefly consider the possibility of full normalization without settling the Arab-Israeli conflict and Palestinian self-determination first. Research for this thesis will include both relevant secondary works, as well as current primary source materials. Secondary sources will include books, journal articles, government reports, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports. Primary sources will include official Saudi, Israeli and U.S. statements, Western and Middle Eastern news reports, foreign government websites, Muslim clerical statements, social media of government officials, and other relevant resources. Research will be limited to works in or translated to English.

G. THESIS CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This thesis is comprised of five chapters. This first chapter encompassed the introduction. The second chapter discusses the historical factors impeding Saudi and Israeli normalization. The third chapter explores the impacts of mutual concern over Iran, Saudi's secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence on increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The fourth chapter analyzes what conditions would further or inhibit cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The final chapter briefly discusses the feasibility of Saudi Arabia and Israel normalizing without Palestinian self-determination, and discusses thesis finding implications to scholarly debates and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

II. WHAT KEEPS SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL FROM NORMALIZING RELATIONS

Before investigating the factors that promote Saudi Arabia's increased contemporary cooperation with Israel, it is essential to understand what has inhibited their normalization of relations in the past, as well as the points of tension that endure today. Above all else, Saudi Arabia and Israel have long been divided by the Arab-Israeli issue of Palestinian self-determination—specifically, Israel's oppressive policies toward Palestinians and occupation of Palestinian territory, to include the holy city of Jerusalem. This chapter discusses the historical factors that have divided Saudi Arabia and Israel on the Palestinian issue—to include Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi religious foundation, the Saudi monarchy's traditional view of Israel and sense of responsibility to the Palestinian people, Saudi-led Arab-Israeli peace initiatives, relevant current events, and Saudi Arabia's enduring requirement for Palestinian self-determination. These points of tension serve as a benchmark for the explanatory power of the factors that promote improved relations between the two countries—mutual concern with Iran, Saudi's secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence.

A. HISTORICAL POINTS OF TENSION

Religion in and of itself is not the ultimate source of Saudi Arabia and Israel's ideological divergence. Instead, Saudi Arabia's religious influences, in tandem with cultural and pragmatic political considerations, have guided Saudi's foreign policy over time and constructed enduring barriers to cooperation with Israel. Wahhabism—a puritanical branch of Sunni Islam—is the official religion of Saudi Arabia, whereas Judaism is the official religion of Israel. While Wahhabism and Judaism are central to Saudi Arabia and Israel's respective identities under opposing interpretations of monotheism, peaceful religious coexistence has long been tolerated in both countries. Saudi Arabia has also allowed for quietist practice of a wide variety of other religions as long as they do not infringe on the superiority and influence of Wahhabism.⁵⁵ Religion is

⁵⁵ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 52.

a critical pillar of the Saudi establishment, but is not irreconcilable with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy dealings with Israel. Instead, the pinnacle barrier between the modern states of Saudi Arabia and Israel over time is their political divergence on the legitimacy of Israel as a state, and Israel's political and economic marginalization of the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia combines pragmatism with the House of Saud's religiously-backed and culturally influenced perception of the Jewish and Palestinian people to shape Saudi's foreign policy towards Israel.

1. Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Roots

Saudi Arabia's ruling monarchy derives and maintains its domestic political legitimacy from a 277-year alliance with the Wahhabi clergy, who continue to command the loyalty of millions of Sunni followers within Saudi Arabia and abroad.⁵⁶ In 1744, the House of Saud—an Arab clan—pledged to uphold and spread Wahhabism across the Arabian peninsula in exchange for Islamic scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's granting the Saud family dominion over the land.⁵⁷ The House of Saud gained political power and military authority as crusaders of Islam, whereas ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his descendants—the Al al-Shaikh—gained religious, moral, and educational authority over the Arabian Peninsula and its people.⁵⁸ The House of Saud and Al al-Shaikh established themselves as “supreme but not absolute in [their] own spheres of authority,” with a system of checks and balances that mutually reinforce one another.⁵⁹

That said, three iterations of the Saudi state have witnessed pivotal growing pains in striking the right balance of Saudi power projection and Wahhabi religious zeal within the region. Under the first Saudi state, between 1744 and 1818, the House of Saud fervently imposed Wahhabism across the region by destroying the existing mosques, shrines and

⁵⁶ David Ottoway, *Saudi Crown Prince Lambasts His Kingdom's Wahhabi Establishment*, Viewpoints Series (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2021), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-crown-prince-lambasts-his-kingdoms-wahhabi-establishment>.

⁵⁷ Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban. *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia : Wahhabism and the State*. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009. 57–58.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=3329020>

⁵⁸ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 5.

⁵⁹ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 58.

Islamic practices that were not in line with Wahhabi teachings.⁶⁰ Once the spread of Wahhabism threatened the political and religious legitimacy of the Ottoman sultan and caliph in Istanbul—the heart of the ruling Ottoman Empire—the sultan dispatched the Ottoman viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali, to Arabia to attack the Saudi-Wahhabi forces. Muhammad Ali’s forces decimated the Saudi-Wahhabi capital at Al-Diriyya in 1818 and reverted the Arabian territories to their pre-Saudi-Wahhabi political and territorial fragmentation.⁶¹

As a result, the second Saudi state between 1818 and 1891 lacked the first state’s unifying enthusiasm for Wahhabism and consequently crumbled from Saud family infighting and division amongst the military ranks.⁶² The Ottoman-backed House of Rashid—rivals to the House of Saud—took advantage of the Saud family’s infighting, defeated the Saudi tribes, and conquered Riyadh in 1890.⁶³ However, exiled House of Saud prince Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Saud (better known to the West as King Ibn Saud) reinvigorated Wahhabi hegemony after reconquering Riyadh from the Rashid dynasty in 1902.⁶⁴ Ibn Saud reestablished the Saud alliance with Al al-Shaikh (who provided religious justification for his rule), healed the House of Saud’s family rifts, and reinstated the Saudi dynasty to rule its territories—a precursor to the 1932 establishment of the third and current Saudi state.⁶⁵ The third Saudi state has not been devoid of family infighting, as was evident from the ruling family’s 1964 removal and replacement of King Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud with his brother, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. However, the Wahhabi clerical establishment has overseen all transitions of power and social reform within the third Saudi state.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 58.

⁶¹ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 59.

⁶² Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 59.

⁶³ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 59–60.

⁶⁴ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 60.

⁶⁵ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 59–60; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 6.

⁶⁶ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 60–61.

This enduring alliance is remarkable because the monarchy and clergy are not equal partners in their arrangement in terms of power and superiority. The monarchy relies on the religious establishment to legitimize regime foreign policy decisions through favorable interpretations of Islamic law and the issuance of *fatwas*—official legal certifications in accordance with Islamic law.⁶⁷ Additionally, the clergy further protects the Saudi regime during political crises by upholding one of Wahhabism’s main religious principles amongst its followers—*ta’at wali al-amr*—which requires full obedience to political rulers as a religious obligation and prohibits political opposition as long as the ruler preserves the practice of Islam and consults the clergy on internal domestic issues.⁶⁸ However, the clergy remains subservient to the monarchy because the monarchy protects and allocates the clergy’s social and religious authority within Saudi Arabia.⁶⁹ Since foreign policy falls outside of the clergy’s established sphere of domestic influence, the clergy is extremely limited in influencing foreign policy development, despite the regime’s requirement for the clergy to endorse Saudi’s foreign policy decisions.

In application, the Saudi state coerces the Wahhabi religious establishment to silence domestic opposition, and endorse the state’s domestic and foreign policies through the clergy’s leverage of *ta’at wali al-amr*.⁷⁰ These Wahhabi clerical endorsements buffer the monarchy from domestic opposition to controversial foreign policy decisions, such as Saudi’s enduring relationship with the United States and limited cooperation with Israel.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Faisal Mukhyat Abu Sulaib, “The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta’at Wali Al-Amr.” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2020): 69–70. <https://doi.org/10.1525/caa.2020.13.3.51>.

⁶⁸ Faisal Mukhyat Abu Sulaib, “The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta’at Wali al-Amr.” 59; Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 214; Ayooob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 28.

⁶⁹ Dr Mohamed Bin Ali, “Al-Wala’ Wal Bara’ in Wahhabism: From A Tool to Fight Shirk to Takfir of Muslim Leaders,” *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, no. 1 (June 2019): 35, <http://jiscnet.com/vol-7-no-1-june-2019-abstract-3-jisc>.

⁷⁰ Abdullah Alaoudh, “State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d., <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75971>; Sulaib, “The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta’at Wali al-Amr,” 70.

⁷¹ Alaoudh, “State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia”; Sulaib, “The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta’at Wali al-Amr,” 67, 70; Ayooob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 70.

In exchange, the monarchy builds Wahhabi schools, sponsors international Wahhabi missionary work, and tolerates the clergy's issuance of ultra-conservative social and religious fatwas that strengthen the clergy's social and religious power over Saudi-Wahhabi citizens and the Wahhabi diaspora.⁷² However, this stability is highly orchestrated by the monarchy itself. While the House of Saud depends on, respects and fosters the clergy's religious and social authority, the monarchy is the stronger partner in this mutually beneficial relationship. There are contemporary examples of the monarchy coercing Wahhabi clerical compliance to meet the needs of the Saud regime, as was evident in 2010 when King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued a royal decree limiting the religious issuance of fatwas to the regime-sponsored Council of Senior Scholars, thereby bolstering the monarchy's religious authority over the clergy in furtherance of its own traditional agenda.⁷³ Conversely, there are no comparable contemporary examples of the Wahhabi clergy coercing the monarchy to comply to the Wahhabi religious agenda.

2. Saudi Monarchy's Traditional View of Israel, Support to Palestinians

The imbalanced dynamic between the Saudi monarchy and Wahhabi clergy begs to ask how powerful the clergy actually is in steering Saudi Arabia's foreign policy with Israel. Is the traditional monarchy's stance against Israel grounded in Wahhabi doctrine, or is Saudi's stance on Israel instead a result of the Saudi monarchy compelling the religious establishment to endorse traditional Arab policies against Israel? While it appears that Wahhabi principles are culpable for limiting Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel, the reality is more nuanced. Wahhabi clerics reinforce the regime's stance on Israel through favorable Quranic interpretation and the issuance of fatwas.⁷⁴ However, Wahhabi doctrine does not drive Saudi's foreign policy towards Israel. Instead, the House of Saud's historical Arabian bigotry against the Jewish people, combined with its growing political pragmatism

⁷² Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia"; Sulaib, "The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Concept: Ta'at Wali al-Amr," 70.

⁷³ Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia."

⁷⁴ Alaoudh.

over time, has driven Saudi's evolving foreign policy towards Israel.⁷⁵ Ibn Saud held a demonized perception of the Jews before he reestablished the House of Saud's alliance with the Al al-Shaikh, believing the Jews were cursed for persecuting Jesus and rejecting the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁶ However, Ibn Saud's perception of the Jews was not supported by Wahhabism. Instead, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab promoted a peaceful coexistence with the Jewish people in attempts to mirror Quranic teachings. The House of Saud garnered political power as overzealous crusaders for Wahhabism, and in doing so may have blended their cultural bigotry against the Jews with Islamic faith to inform Saudi's foreign policy.⁷⁷ As part of maintaining that political power, the monarchy has leveraged the Islamic principle of *ta'at wali al-amr* to guide Wahhabi clerical endorsement of Saudi's changing foreign policy towards Israel over time.⁷⁸

The Wahhabi clergy could justify Saudi's political opposition to Israel through the Salafi principle of *Al Wala' wal Bara'*—loyalty (*wala'*) to Muslims conforming to Wahhabi practices, and disavowal (*bara'*) of all non-Muslims.⁷⁹ However, the Wahhabi clergy does not have the political power to implement *Al Wala' wal Bara'* into Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, and would need the monarchy to authorize such a stance towards Israel.⁸⁰ Over time, *Al Wala' wal Bara'* has been interpreted by Salafi scholars in two fundamentally different ways. One interpretation calls for a spiritual *jihād* (struggle) against heresy and disbelief, whereas the second interpretation calls for a physical *jihād* against non-believers, to include the use of extreme violence against non-Muslims.⁸¹ The founder of Wahhabism, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, did promote the principle of *Al Wala' wal Bara'* and prohibited Wahhabi Muslims from befriending, allying themselves or imitating

⁷⁵ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 565; Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 70.

⁷⁶ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 565.

⁷⁷ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 5, 60.

⁷⁸ Ali, "Al-Wala' Wal Bara' in Wahhabism: From A Tool to Fight Shirk to Takfir of Muslim Leaders," 35; Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia."

⁷⁹ Ali, 28–29.

⁸⁰ Ali, 35.

⁸¹ Ali, 39–40.

non-Wahhabi Muslims.⁸² However, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab did not support physical hostility against the Jewish people, and instead advocated for cooperation and treaties with both Christians and Jews whenever possible due to their special status as fellow monotheists.⁸³

The contemporary Saudi state has implemented varying and often contradictory clerical interpretations of *Al Wala' wal Bara'* in application to Israel.⁸⁴ The Wahhabi clergy remains subservient to the monarchy out of fear of the regime withdrawing the clergy's social and religious authority, and has largely abandoned its political application of *Al Wala' wal Bara'* altogether.⁸⁵ Wahhabi scholars uphold the social and religious application of *Al Wala' wal Bara'* inside of Saudi Arabia, but either ignore its political application to the state's alliance with non-Muslim countries such as Israel, or issue fatwas in contradiction to *Al Wala' wal Bara'* as directed by the monarchy to legitimize the regime's political decisions.⁸⁶ There are some Wahhabi scholars who remain in opposition to the state's alliance with non-Muslim countries under the political interpretation of *Al Wala' wal Bara'*.⁸⁷ However, the regime silences clerical dissent and coerces clerical compliance by allocating social and religious authority to regime-friendly Wahhabi clerics.⁸⁸ If the Saudi monarchy ultimately guides Saudi's foreign policy and compels Wahhabi clerical conformity to those policies, then Saudi's anti-Israeli policies are predominantly the result of the regime conflating its traditional Arab perception of the Jews and political pragmatism with faith.⁸⁹ The monarchy has leveraged the Wahhabi clergy to endorse, and therefore legitimize both anti-Semitic policies and tolerance towards the Jewish state, depending on the regime's fluctuating political requirements.

⁸² Ali, 28–30.

⁸³ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 14, 17.

⁸⁴ Ali, "Al-Wala' Wal Bara' in Wahhabism: From A Tool to Fight Shirk to Takfir of Muslim Leaders," 35.

⁸⁵ Ali, 35.

⁸⁶ Ali, 35.

⁸⁷ Ali, 36.

⁸⁸ Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia."

⁸⁹ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 60.

Saudi Arabia's stance against Israel and support to the Palestinians has changed over time as a result of the monarchy's oscillation between reform initiatives and Wahhabi-backed Arab tradition. Ibn Saud's desire to demonstrate the compatibility between Wahhabi and Western ideologies, combined with his conflicting demonized perception of the Jewish people has shaped Saudi Arabia's enduring relations with Israel.⁹⁰ Ibn Saud delineated the protection of the Palestinians' right to their homeland as "an existential Islamic [and] Arab responsibility" and core tenet of Saudi's original foreign policy.⁹¹ Even before Israel's establishment in 1948, Saudi Arabia communicated support to the Palestinians through harsh rhetoric and criticism of the Western-backed Zionist displacement and expulsion of Palestinian citizens from Palestine—the precursor state to Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁹² In 1945, when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Saudi King Ibn Saud for assistance in the creation of Israel as the Jewish homeland, Ibn Saud rejected the idea that the Jewish people should have their own country in the Middle East simply because they were persecuted and murdered by the German Nazis.⁹³ Ibn Saud instead advocated for the Jews and their allies to "make [their German] enemy and oppressor pay," since the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine required the Arabs—specifically the Palestinians—to pay for German crimes against the Jews.⁹⁴ Saudi Arabia therefore remained opposed to the founding of Israel in 1948, financed Palestinian groups in their fight against Israel in 1967, and joined the 1973 Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' oil embargo to pressure Israel's allies to withdrawal their support to Israel during the Yom Kippur War.⁹⁵ The Saudi regime has politically opposed Israel through policies and boycotts—short of triggering military conflict—that balance its

⁹⁰ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 565; Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 57, 70.

⁹¹ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 70.

⁹² Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 584.

⁹³ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 223.

⁹⁴ Hubbard, 223.

⁹⁵ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 584; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 223.

traditional Arab policies against the Jewish people and religious responsibility to protect other Muslims, with its defense-driven relationships with the West.⁹⁶

3. Arab-Israeli Peace Initiatives

The Saudi monarchy's political stance towards the Jewish people involved pragmatic considerations beyond the legitimacy of the state of Israel alone. Before Israel's establishment, the House of Saud mediated the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt in Palestine to pacify its British ally and prevent Saudi's rival, the Hashemite Dynasty, from gaining influence in Palestine and the Arab world writ large.⁹⁷ While Saudi supported anti-Israeli initiatives in the region from 1945 onward, Saudi did not lead any of these initiatives, and avoided direct conflict in the Arab-Israeli wars between 1948 and 1967 altogether.⁹⁸ However, after the 1973 oil boom and Saudi Arabia's nascent preeminence as a regional and international partner, Saudi began to spearhead a series of proactive policies to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁹⁹ Saudi has also avoided direct conflict in the Arab-Israeli wars from 1973 to present, but has been actively involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process since the early 1980s.¹⁰⁰

Saudi's involvement in the peace process has combined the public broadcast of detailed peace initiatives with covert diplomatic negotiations with Israel.¹⁰¹ Then-Saudi Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's 1981 peace initiative and then-Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) both advocated for the following: Israel's withdrawal from the territories it conquered (including East Jerusalem) during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Jewish settler evacuation from those territories, considerations for the Palestinian right of return to their homes in Israel, and the

⁹⁶ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 565.

⁹⁷ Podeh, 565.

⁹⁸ Podeh, 584.

⁹⁹ Podeh, 584.

¹⁰⁰ Podeh, 571.

¹⁰¹ Podeh, 571.

re-establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem.¹⁰² The two Saudi peace initiatives subtly differed in their wording on the recognition of Israel as a state, as well as the Palestinian right of return to their homeland. Fahd's plan "[implied] indirect recognition of Israel," and the Palestinian right of return or the receipt of monetary compensation from Israel.¹⁰³ However, as a result of Saudi wanting to improve its image to the West following September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States that involved 15 Saudi nationals, as well as Saudi's desire to contain regional instability emanating from the Second Intifada in 2000, the API was far more accommodating to Israel.¹⁰⁴ The plan advocated for full normalization between the Arab States and Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and a more compromising "just solution" to displaced Palestinians' right to return in accordance with the UN General Assembly guidance.¹⁰⁵ The API continues to inform Saudi's approach to Israel and the Palestinian issue, as Saudi tradition and political pragmatism compete to inform Saudi's foreign policy towards Israel.

B. CURRENT STATUS OF TENSIONS

Saudi and Israel's pragmatic relationship endures today under the current Saudi monarch, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. It ebbs and flows as a result of developments to the Palestinian issue, mutual security concerns, Saudi's reform initiatives, and U.S. influence in the region. However, King Salman's son and the future king of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), notably diverges from the traditional Saudi monarchy's stance against Israel and sense of responsibility to the Palestinian people. He is far more open to increasing Saudi's cooperative relationship with Israel than his predecessors. MBS' forefathers based their perceptions and foreign policy towards Israel within the context of the House of Saud's traditional role as crusaders for

¹⁰² Podeh, 571–74.

¹⁰³ Podeh, 571.

¹⁰⁴ Podeh, 574.

¹⁰⁵ Podeh, 574.

Islam, the Arab-Israeli wars and Palestinian intifadas.¹⁰⁶ Conversely, MBS has shaped his perception of Israel as part of a hierarchy of contemporary existential threats to the Kingdom, of which Israel is not at the top of that rack and stack. MBS instead considers Iran, jihadist groups, and transnational Islamist movements as existential threats to the monarchy, not Israel.¹⁰⁷ MBS recognizes Israel's utility in combatting existential threats to the Kingdom and "[does not] have [the] visceral, emotional attachment to the Palestinian cause" that the previous generation of Saudi leaders held.¹⁰⁸ However, despite the title of Crown Prince, MBS is not the king yet. He will not succeed his father as king without the royal family's façade of approval, backed by the Wahhabi religious establishment. More importantly, even if he becomes king, his reign will not last without reconciling the ruling family's enduring cultural bigotry towards the Jewish people, as well as maintaining the Wahhabi clerical endorsement that legitimizes the House of Saud's political power.¹⁰⁹

1. Recent Events

Any easing of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Israel on the Palestinian issue over the last two decades is further complicated by early 2021 escalatory events between Israel and Hamas—the Palestinian militant group that governs Gaza. In early May 2021, an 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas ignited after Israeli forces attempted to execute an October 2020 Israeli court order to evict four Palestinian families from their homes in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah.¹¹⁰ Pro-Jewish settler organizations claimed the land was originally under Jewish ownership, while the Palestinians conversely viewed the evictions as part of an Israeli policy to displace

¹⁰⁶ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 5, 223.

¹⁰⁷ Hubbard, 223.

¹⁰⁸ Hubbard, 223.

¹⁰⁹ Yury Barmin. "Can Mohammed Bin Salman Break the Saudi-Wahhabi Pact?" AlJazeera, January 07, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/1/7/can-mohammed-bin-salman-break-the-saudi-wahhabi-pact>

¹¹⁰ Ibraheem Abu Mustafa, "What Led to the Most Recent Israel-Palestine Escalation?," AlJazeera, May 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/12/what-lead-up-to-most-recent-israel-palestine-escalation>.

Palestinians from Jerusalem to preserve a Jewish majority in the city.¹¹¹ The evictions coincided with the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, resulting in confrontations between Israeli forces and Palestinian protestors at the homes of those being evicted, and at the Al-Aqsa Mosque—Islam’s third holiest site. What started as Israeli riot control escalated into Israeli forces conducting a flash raid against the Al-Aqsa compound that wounded over 300 Palestinians. The incident then spiraled into Hamas firing approximately 200 rockets towards Israel (although Israeli forces claim over 1,500 rockets) and Israeli fighter jets bombing the Gaza strip, to include Palestinian armed group headquarters, a police building, and civilian apartments.¹¹² The recent clashes mark the most intense escalation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza since Israel’s 2014 war on Gaza.

This Al-Aqsa incident inflames historical anti-Israel sentiments amongst the Saudi monarchy and religious establishment alike. Despite international calls for de-escalation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that “both the might and frequency of the attacks will be increased” against Gaza.¹¹³ In opposition to Israel, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud reaffirmed Saudi Arabia’s solidarity with the Palestinian people and commitment to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. Faisal reiterated Riyadh’s enduring stance that stability in the Middle East is partly contingent on a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israel conflict, stating that “[Saudi Arabia’s] position is clear, which is to reach a permanent solution according to the Arab [Peace] Initiative.”¹¹⁴

2. Saudi Arabia’s Enduring Requirement for Palestinian Self-Determination

Israel’s delivery of what Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan calls “a Palestinian state within the 1967 border that gives Palestinians dignity and their rights”

¹¹¹ Abu Mustafa.

¹¹² Abu Mustafa.

¹¹³ Abu Mustafa.

¹¹⁴ Rawad Taha, “Saudi Arabia Reaffirms Commitment to Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as Capital,” *Al Arabiya English*, May 19, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/05/19/Saudi-Arabia-reaffirms-commitment-to-Palestinian-state-with-East-Jerusalem-as-capital>.

endures as Saudi's central impediment to full normalization of relations with Israel.¹¹⁵ Saudi's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative made a significant step in recognizing Israel's security concerns emanating from the Palestinian population. Additionally, Saudi has eased its economic restrictions against Israel, and the two countries continue to cooperate in technology, medical, intelligence, and military arenas, despite the vague and highly classified nature of their cooperation.¹¹⁶ However, despite these improvements, Saudi's requirement for Palestinian self-determination as a prerequisite to normalization with Israel remains impassable.¹¹⁷ The House of Saud will continue to leverage the intertwining values of Arab tradition, political pragmatism and Wahhabism—including the monarchy's traditional self-imposed responsibility to the Palestinian people—to safeguard the regime from domestic opposition that could topple the monarchy.¹¹⁸ Therefore, Saudi's malleable Arab-Israeli peace initiatives and fluctuating cooperation with Israel will continue to balance Saudi's dynamic considerations of self-defense, Arab tradition and its relationship with the United States. The Arab-Israeli issue keeps Saudi Arabia and Israel in adversarial tension, and requires the Saudi monarchy to make foreign policy decisions on Israel that balance the demands of its patriarchal tradition, Wahhabi constituency, and political ambitions.

¹¹⁵ MEE Staff, "Saudi Foreign Minister Says Normalisation with Israel Would Bring 'Tremendous Benefits,'" *Middle East Eye*, April 2, 2021, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-israel-foreign-minister-normalisation-tremendous-benefits>.

¹¹⁶ MEE Staff, "Saudi Foreign Minister Says Normalisation with Israel Would Bring 'Tremendous Benefits;'" Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 578–79, 584–85.

¹¹⁷ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 406.

¹¹⁸ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 58.

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III. DRIVERS OF SAUDI ARABIA’S COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

The main drivers of Saudi cooperation with Israel—mutual concern over Iran, Saudi’s secular reforms under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and U.S. influence—are highly nuanced when examined separately, and complex at best when examined collectively. While these drivers have significant potential to motivate Saudi Arabia to forge cooperative ties short of normalization of relations with Israel, they could also wither in effectiveness in the event that Iran ceases to be a security threat to the Kingdom, MBS reverses reform initiatives, or U.S. influence matters less in the region. This chapter examines each individual driver and its specific impact on Saudi Arabia’s desire to cooperate with Israel—to include a historical background of each driver, and analysis of how the driver promotes Saudi cooperation with Israel. These drivers are presented from the Saudi perspective. Ultimately, this chapter argues that all three of these drivers have the potential to promote short-term strategic incentives for Saudi Arabia and Israel to cooperate on limited and mutually beneficial regional activities.

A. MUTUAL CONCERN OVER IRAN

Of the three drivers this case study examines, the threat of Iran is currently the most palpable driver of Saudi Arabia’s cooperation initiatives with Israel. Saudi Arabia and Israel both view Iran as their greatest security threat.¹¹⁹ Iran’s exportation of revolutionary Islam, mobilization of client militias, and nuclear program pose both internal and external threats to the Saudi regime. This has motivated Saudi Arabia to establish a pragmatic and strategic relationship with Israel to counter and deter Iran’s regional hegemonic ambitions. These growing threats from Iran have encouraged the Saudi Kingdom to exchange historical animosity towards the Jewish state for strategic deterrence in the form of limited

¹¹⁹ Abadi, “Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives,” 433.

military and intelligence cooperation against Iran—an arrangement that is likely to continue as long as a mutually perceived threat from Iran exists.¹²⁰

1. History of the Iranian Threat to Saudi Arabia

Often referred to as the Middle Eastern Cold War, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a decades-old power feud, exacerbated by ideological differences and foreign influence.¹²¹ In a 2018 interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accused the Iranian regime of “spread[ing] their extremist [Shiite] ideology....an ideology of pure evil,” and called Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the “Hitler of the Middle East” that is “trying to conquer the world.”¹²² Iran’s entire existence is a posture against foreign aggression, specifically against the United States, Israel, and their network of partners and allies. Saudi Arabia’s cooperation with the United States and Israel in coordination of political and military efforts against Iran—even inconsistently—further compounds Iran’s revolutionary ideology. Iran operationalizes its ideology by exporting its revolutionary model, leveraging a proxy network of regional allies, and pursuing a nuclear enrichment program. Iran’s 1979 Revolution—more specifically Iran’s exportation of its revolutionary model beyond its borders, as well as Iran’s proxy groups and nuclear enrichment program—have culminated into a monumental and enduring physical and ideological threat to the Saudi regime that continues to shape Saudi’s domestic and foreign policies, and informs its military alliances.

¹²⁰ John Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019), 18. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier>

¹²¹ Jonathan Marcus, “Why Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Bitter Rivals,” *BBC News*, September 16, 2019, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809>; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 48.

¹²² Jeffrey Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good,’” *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 222–24.

a. *Iran's Revolutionary Ideology*

Iran's revolutionary ideology threatens Saudi Arabia's political power and ruling authority derived from its role as a protector of Islam.¹²³ The 1979 Iranian Revolution permeates every aspect of Iran's existence. Iran establishes its domestic and foreign policies to address threats to its main security goals—safeguarding Iran's juristic guardianship and revolutionary ideology, and expelling the United States and Israel from the region. The regime's enduring commitment to its ideology, its narrative of victimhood, and its desire for regional leadership overlap and reinforce one another to influence Iran's behavior in the Middle East in pursuit of its main security goals. Iran's revolutionary ideology is antithetical to Saudi's foreign policy goals of safeguarding the Saudi regime, promoting Wahhabism at home and abroad, and preserving its longstanding relationship with the United States.¹²⁴

Above all else, Iran's primary security goal is the defense of its theocratic regime and revolutionary ideology—both of which challenge Saudi's political and religious influence in the Middle East. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei guides the regime, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and subordinate Basij paramilitary force defend the regime.¹²⁵ Khamenei's absolute authority is outlined in Iran's 1979 Constitution under the principle of *vali-ye faqih*—delineating guardian jurist rule over the Islamic Republic.¹²⁶ Safeguarding this juristic guardianship is critical to the Islamic Republic's existence. Without a loyal and cohesive support base to uphold the juristic guardianship, there would be no Islamic Republic.¹²⁷ The Supreme Leader has ultimate religio-political authority that trickles down into all domestic and foreign policies. This

¹²³ Hubbard, 5, 171.

¹²⁴ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 70; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 47–48.

¹²⁵ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 235–38; Saeid Golkar, "Protests and Regime Suppression in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Policy Notes* PN85 (2020): 2.

¹²⁶ "Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2014): 38; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 11–12.

¹²⁷ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 188.

dynamic insulates the regime from being overthrown by controlling the distribution of political power and ultimately creates a façade of institutional consensus.¹²⁸ Iran’s foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia is therefore a reflection of its original anti-imperialist 1979 revolutionary ideology that Iran’s Supreme Leaders have safeguarded over time. Whereas Saudi Arabia has established strong political and economic ties to other regional actors and the Western world over time, Iran has remained mostly isolated and forged a foreign policy that categorizes Saudi as an enemy co-conspirator with the West—and therefore an illegitimate Muslim power.¹²⁹

Furthermore, Iran has framed Saudi as a U.S.-backed aggressor that challenges Iran’s stability and regional ambitions by actively opposing its revolutionary ideology.¹³⁰ Iran’s narrative of victimization by what Foreign Minister Zarif describes as the United States and its “anti-Iran co-conspirators,” has driven regime security and revolutionary ideology by emphasizing persistent external threats to Iran.¹³¹ Conflict is integral to Iran justifying its juristic guardianship and maintaining its revolutionary momentum.¹³² Because the 1979 Revolution sprang from a narrative of victimhood, Iran has asserted its dignity and independence from U.S. intervention and foreign influence writ large after two decades of perceived oppression by Iran’s U.S.-backed monarchy.¹³³ This sentiment endures, as was evident in Ayatollah Khamenei’s early May 2021 public statement that

¹²⁸ Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Clears Way for Hard-Line Judiciary Chief to Become President.” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/middleeast/iran-election-khamenei-raisi.html>; Parisa Hafezi, “Khamenei Criticizes Iran’s Foreign Minister Over Leaked Remarks.” *Reuters*, May 02, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/khamenei-criticises-irans-foreign-minister-over-leaked-remarks-2021-05-02/>.

¹²⁹ Afshon Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 7, 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862>.

¹³⁰ Alireza Nader, “Saudi-Iranian Tensions,” *RAND*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/01/saudi-iranian-tensions.html>.

¹³¹ Javad Zarif, “Netanyahu Has Joined the Disgraceful Journey of His Anti-Iran Co-Conspirators.” (Twitter, June 3, 2021), <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1400495114737360901>.

¹³² Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients,” 27.

¹³³ Ostovar, 10; Morgane Colleau, “Iran’s Janus-Faced U.S. Policy: The Rouhani Administration Between Continuity and Change, Opportunity and Constraint,” in *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy* (Springer, 2016), 35.

“the Islamic Revolution removed Iran from being under control of the [United States].”¹³⁴ The regime has constructed a permanent narrative that the juristic guardianship defends Iran’s strength and dignity against imperialist aggression. The enduring presence of the United States and its partners (such as Saudi Arabia) in the region, as well as crippling U.S. economic sanctions against Iran, allow the Iranian regime to perpetuate this victimhood narrative that Iran is battling for the soul of the Middle East. This revolutionary momentum of victimhood perpetuates part of Iran’s existential conflict with Saudi Arabia because of Saudi’s enduring ties with the United States.

Following Iran’s primary security goal of safeguarding the regime and its revolutionary ideology is its commitment to expelling the United States and Israel, both physically and in influence, from the Middle East.¹³⁵ To Iran, the enduring U.S. military footprint in the region and its impact on regional partners, as well as Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands continue the system of domination that inspired Iran’s 1979 Revolution.¹³⁶ Per its constitution, Iran can justify its legal obligation to expel the United States and Israel from the region on the basis of foreign occupation that destabilizes the region and spreads un-Islamic values to other countries like Saudi Arabia. The physical expulsion of U.S. and Israeli forces, as well as the degradation of their influence in the region bolsters Iran’s security by eliminating foreign military threats and increasing Iran’s military power through its own expanding network of allies.¹³⁷

b. Iran’s Exportation of Revolutionary Islam

Immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Iran’s establishment of its theocratic regime, Saudi Arabia was concerned that Iran’s intention to export the revolution to neighboring countries would spill over into Saudi Arabia and throughout the Gulf

¹³⁴ Ali Khamenei, “The Islamic Revolution Removed Iran from Being under the Control of the US.,” (Twitter, May 2, 2021), https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1388903955267194882.

¹³⁵ Colleau, “Iran’s Janus-Faced U.S. Policy: The Rouhani Administration Between Continuity and Change, Opportunity and Constraint,” 35.

¹³⁶ Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients,” 10–11.

¹³⁷ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 10–11, 14.

States.¹³⁸ Saudi's concerns compounded over the years as its diplomatic relations with Iran deteriorated, and Saudi instead developed a strategic partnership with the United States while Iran sought to undermine that partnership.¹³⁹ Iran's 1979 Revolution galvanized an enduring legacy of Iranian Supreme leaders advancing foreign policy based on Iran as the self-appointed leader of all Shia Muslims—specifically those in the Middle East—in their fight against imperialism, to include countries like Saudi Arabia that perpetuate imperialism.¹⁴⁰ Iran is devoted to the protection and empowerment of the region's Shia Muslims and its interpreted constitutional mandate to export its Revolution with all of the resources it has available.¹⁴¹ Saudi Arabia's minority Shia populations and the Saudi-backed Palestinians are direct recipients of Iran's exported revolutionary ideology that threatens to undermine Saudi's influence at home and abroad.

Iran's anti-monarchical, pan-Islamic revolutionary ideology places Iran in direct religious and ideological competition with Saudi Arabia.¹⁴² Exporting the revolution is both an internal and external security policy. Externally, Iran is standing in solidarity with similarly oppressed people (including Sunnis) and nations as a leader against the imperialist enemies of Islam.¹⁴³ However, exporting the revolution outside of Iran's borders provides an additional mechanism to internally secure its juristic guardianship. By leading Muslim allies abroad, Iran projects its own anti-imperialist and pro-Islamic goals that underpin its revolutionary ideology, and establishes foreign allies that are invested in Iranian regime survival.¹⁴⁴ The result is a regional hegemonic rivalry between Saudi

¹³⁸ Valeri Modebadze, "The Battle for Regional Dominance Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (January 2019): 66–67.

¹³⁹ Modebadze, "The Battle for Regional Dominance Between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran," 67.

¹⁴⁰ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 22.

¹⁴¹ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 15.

¹⁴² Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 170.

¹⁴³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 102–3.

¹⁴⁴ Ostovar, 102–3.

Arabia and Iran, and a shared perception that one country gains influence at the expense of the other.¹⁴⁵

The destabilizing posture of Iran's exportation of its revolution as a progressive model of liberation challenges Saudi Arabia's monarchical and religious establishment, and amplifies existing social and political grievances within disaffected Sunni and Shia communities in Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁶ Following its 1979 Revolution and transition to theocratic governance, the Iranian Shia clerical establishment openly challenged the Saudi monarchy and Wahhabi clerical establishment, claiming that the empowerment of all Muslims was incompatible with Gulf monarchies and proselytizing ideas of Gulf citizens demanding rights and opposing authoritarian rule.¹⁴⁷ Iran's ideological attacks against the Saudi regime, as well as Iran's exportation of its revolutionary model to disenfranchised populations within Saudi Arabia threatens Saudi's existence by undermining its political legitimacy.¹⁴⁸ Iran operationalizes these attacks through the use of proxy forces.

c. Iran's Proxy Groups

Since the early 2000s, Iran's mobilization of Shia and non-Shia militia groups has posed both internal revolutionary political threats and external military threats to the Saudi regime. Iran has used proxy forces to undermine Saudi's political authority, and punish Saudi Arabia for contributing to the lasting Western influence in the Middle East.¹⁴⁹ Iranian client militias have threatened Saudi's domestic political security by instigating domestic unrest within the Kingdom and neighboring Saudi-backed Bahrain.¹⁵⁰ They have also threatened Saudi's physical security by training and equipping small cells in Saudi and Bahrain, as well as client militias in Lebanon and Yemen to attack Saudi Arabia.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

¹⁴⁶ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 180–81.

¹⁴⁷ Chipman and Staff, 180.

¹⁴⁸ Ottoway, "Saudi Crown Prince Lambasts His Kingdom's Wahhabi Establishment."

¹⁴⁹ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 179–80.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/evolution-shia-insurgency-bahrain/>.

¹⁵¹ Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain."

Additionally, Iran has monopolized on the turbulent relationship between Saudi Arabia and Hamas in the Gaza Strip by funding Hamas as Saudi distanced itself from Hamas over time while maintaining its support to the Palestinians.¹⁵² Iran has used proxy forces as an extension of its military reach and power, and developed a transnational clientage of allied militants—based on a blend of political, ideological and material incentives—to offensively project the regime’s influence by spreading its revolutionary ideology and defending its territorial interests.¹⁵³ Saudi Arabia, as well as other Sunni Gulf States have faced a diverse array of ideological, regional and security challenges emanating from Iran’s shadowy alliances with foreign civilian and military entities.

Iran views these partnerships partly as a means to increase its religio-political authority at the expense of Saudi’s political and religious establishments, but more broadly as an “Axis of Resistance” to Western domination, Israel, and Western-compliant Arab governments.¹⁵⁴ The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) stresses that Iran’s development, maintenance and control over of its third party relationships vary from each operational theatre based on mutual objectives.¹⁵⁵ IISS further explains that the traditional definition of the term ‘proxy’ does not apply across the board for Iran’s varying regional partnerships since ‘proxy’ implies Iran’s directive and uniform level of control over weaker non-state actors. Iran’s foreign partnerships instead have varying command and control structures and are not part of a formalized network. These varying third party relationships are ideologically, politically and logistically distinct, and can either emerge as part of natural enduring partnership, or a shorter partnership of opportunity. Iran’s strategic proxy force capability fluctuates in tandem with evolving conflict, Iran’s ability to mobilize these groups as part of a global Shia community, and the potential strategic advantage it obtains by doing so.¹⁵⁶ Although not all-encompassing of the elements of Iran’s Axis of Resistance

¹⁵² Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9, 32, 71.

¹⁵³ Afshon Ostovar, “Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1247–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy185>.

¹⁵⁴ Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 8, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Chipman and Staff, 8.

¹⁵⁶ Chipman and Staff, 8.

that impact Saudi Arabia, the following primary examples of Iranian-backed third parties demonstrate the Axis' external threat to Saudi Arabia's regional security: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and the Houthis in Yemen.

(1) Lebanese Hezbollah

Iran's strongest client, Lebanese Hezbollah, has conducted and supported Iranian-directed attacks via the Yemeni Houthis against Saudi infrastructure, as well as recruited and trained Saudi Arabian Shia citizens as part of Iran's revolution-exporting agenda.¹⁵⁷ Lebanese Hezbollah, Hezbollah is part of a small collection of the Iranian clientage that subscribes to *vali-ye faqih*—delineating the Supreme Leader's authority over the Islamic Republic and broader Middle East.¹⁵⁸ The IISS convey that Hezbollah, which established a relationship with Iran in the 1980s as a result of the Lebanese Civil War and Iran's Islamic Revolution, is best described as an ideological partner of Iran since its unique proxy relationship with Iran transcends material incentives.¹⁵⁹ Hezbollah remains resilient against non-religious influences and would pursue the same ideological objectives as Iran without Iran's sponsorship, albeit with more humble resources.¹⁶⁰ As a result of over four decades of Iranian mentorship, Hezbollah has become the most instrumental non-state actor in furthering Iran's regional goals and activities. Enduring regional sectarian tensions and Saudi's fight against the Houthis—another Iran-backed foreign force—in Yemen position Hezbollah to directly target Saudi infrastructure, as well as train other Iran-backed third parties to target Saudi through asymmetric and plausibly deniable attacks.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Chipman and Staff, 75.

¹⁵⁸ Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," 16.

¹⁵⁹ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9.

¹⁶⁰ Chipman and Staff, 9.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Levitt, "Iranian and Hezbollah Threats to Saudi Arabia: Past Precedents," The Washington Institute, May 19, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-and-hezbollah-threats-saudi-arabia-past-precedents>.

(2) Houthis

Since at least 2014, Iran has supported the Houthi movement against the Yemeni government and Western forces and partners—to include Saudi Arabia—in the region. Iran leverages the Houthis’ deep resentment towards Saudi Arabia and the West to galvanize attacks against Saudi and western infrastructure in the Gulf, and provides the Houthis with funding, training and equipment.¹⁶² IISS reports that the Houthis are best described as a strategic ally of Iran, since they share mutual opposition against the West and Saudi Arabia; however, similarly to Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis would continue to pursue their opposition without Iranian sponsorship albeit with more humble resources.¹⁶³ Their research elaborates that despite a mutual overarching Shia religious commonality, the Houthis are Zaydi Shia and do not subscribe to the Iranian Twelver doctrine or follow the Supreme Leader as their singular religio-political authority. Instead, Iran’s strong relationship with the Houthis likely emanates from its exclusive patronage of the Houthis, thereby allowing Iran to spread its influence in Yemen and wage war against regional rivals, to include Saudi Arabia. IISS notes that the Houthi’s unexpected takeover of Sanaa, Yemen in 2014 provided Iran with an opportunity to inexpensively inflict damage against Saudi Arabia. By 2017, the Houthis used Iranian explosive boats to attack Saudi vessels in the Red Sea and Iranian-funded and technologically developed extended range missiles to target Riyadh directly, which Saudi Arabia viewed as an act of war.¹⁶⁴ Iran is committed to the survival of the Houthis and their ability to project power throughout the region on Iran’s behalf, especially against Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁵

(3) Hamas

Lastly, Iran has degraded Saudi Arabia’s political relationship with Hamas—a Sunni Palestinian Islamist nationalist insurgent group and affiliate of the Muslim

¹⁶² Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients,” 21; Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 12, 28.

¹⁶³ Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Chipman and Staff, 12, 28; Knights and Levitt, “The Evolution of Shi’a Insurgency in Bahrain.”

¹⁶⁵ Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 159.

Brotherhood—by deepening its own relationship with Hamas since the early 2000s.¹⁶⁶ The IISS categorizes—as a partner of Iran with roots tracing back to the 1990s, since without Iran’s transactional sponsorship Hamas likely would not pursue the same objectives.¹⁶⁷ The IISS further notes that as a Sunni component of Iran’s Axis of Revolution, Hamas underscores Iran’s ability to shelve sectarian differences in the advancement of its geopolitical aspirations. Lacking an organic relationship with Iran, Hamas rejects Tehran’s religious authority, is wary of bolstering Persian power in Arab lands, and maintains a complex relationship with Israel.¹⁶⁸ However, Iran and Hezbollah have become Hamas’ primary sponsors. IISS further elaborates that Iran views Hamas as a counterweight against Israel and the West, political cover for Iran’s outreach in the Arab world, and a potential ally in the event of a multi-front war against Israel, the West and its Arab partners like Saudi Arabia.

Despite Saudi Arabia’s historical funding of and support of Hamas’ activities against Israel, Saudi Arabia now views the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a mechanism for Iran to exploit and further exacerbate Arab division and expand its regional influence.¹⁶⁹ Hezbollah and Iran do not have full command and control over Hamas and their relationship has ebbed and flowed, as evident with Hamas’ sympathies for the opposition that Iran aided the Syrian regime in fighting during the 2011 Syrian revolution. However, Hezbollah and Iran—who both supported the Syrian regime—minimally punished Hamas by decreasing their funding and support, while allowing for future rapprochement.¹⁷⁰ Saudi continues to publicly support the Palestinian right to self-determination, and remains critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. However, Saudi

¹⁶⁶ Adnan Abu Amer, “What Is behind the Saudi Campaign against Hamas?,” September 23, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/9/23/what-is-behind-the-saudi-campaign-against-hamas>.

¹⁶⁷ Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9, 71–72.

¹⁶⁸ Chipman and Staff, 71–72.

¹⁶⁹ Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018,” 575.

¹⁷⁰ Chipman and Staff, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9, 32, 71–72.

Arabia has largely disassociated itself from Hamas and even imprisoned Hamas leaders and supporters due to Hamas' suspected terrorist activities and affiliation with Iran.¹⁷¹

(4) Proxy Group Activity Against Saudi Arabia

Viewing the expulsion of United States and Western forces from the region as a means of increasing its regional dominance, Iran has supported militant groups within Saudi Arabia to pressure the Saudi government to abandon its Western alliances and extract a cost for Saudi's prolonged political partnership with the United States.¹⁷² Iran's revolutionary message has garnered proxy support from both Shia and non-Shia Saudi citizens. Specific to Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom's religious sectarian policies have alienated Saudi Shia populations, and Iran is the only foreign country to vocally recognize and support the Saudi Shia plight.¹⁷³ Consequently, Iran's religiously inspired anti-Saudi rhetoric has resonated with disaffected fellow Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, and possibly amplified pre-existing social and political grievances against the Saudi regime.¹⁷⁴ The IISS provides the example of the 1979–1980 Intifada of the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia—a violent uprising in protest of Shia social and economic exclusion within Saudi Arabia—as the direct result of Iranian inspiration and support to the disaffected Shia population within Saudi Arabia.¹⁷⁵ The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point claims that Saudi Arabia has contemporarily viewed its minority Shia population as a potentially disloyal vehicle for Iranian expansion.¹⁷⁶ In 2017 Saudi Arabia uncovered a five man cell of Saudi Arabian Shia militants, trained in Iran by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) on the use of rocket propelled grenades and explosives. The Saudi cell was part of

¹⁷¹ Amer, "What Is Behind the Saudi Campaign Against Hamas?"

¹⁷² Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 179–80.

¹⁷³ Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," 1255.

¹⁷⁴ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 181.

¹⁷⁵ Chipman and Staff, 181.

¹⁷⁶ Chris Zambelis, "The Kingdom's Perfect Storm: Sectarian Tension and Terrorism in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province," *CTC Sentinel*, (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Vol. 9, Iss. 4: April 2016). <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-kingdoms-perfect-storm-sectarian-tension-and-terrorism-in-saudi-arabias-eastern-province/>.

an Iranian effort to revive Hezbollah al-Hejaz, an Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated group responsible for the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Khobar, Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. service members.¹⁷⁷ Saudi has responded to its association of its Shia community with its broader rivalry with Iran through violent and repressive domestic crackdowns, as was evident in the 2016 execution of 47 dissident Shiites, to include the most senior Shia cleric and outspoken dissident in Saudi's Eastern Province, Nimr al-Nimr.¹⁷⁸

Furthermore, in 2011 Iran inflicted retaliatory proxy attacks against Saudi Arabia in response to a Saudi-backed Bahraini government crackdown against Shia protesters during the Arab Spring. Shock and anger amongst the Iranian regime, Bahraini Shia, and Shia leadership in Iraq culminated in Iran sending covert IRGC operatives to Bahrain to meet with Bahraini protesters, as well as Iranian-backed assassination planning against the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States.¹⁷⁹ Iran's main objective in establishing closer relations with Bahraini Shia was to inflict a retaliatory response against Saudi Arabia and prepare the Bahraini Shia resistance for further uprisings by training, operationalizing, and resourcing improvised explosive device cells inside Bahrain.¹⁸⁰ Following the Bahraini government's retaliation against Arab Spring protesters, a small group of Bahraini Shia youth travelled abroad and received training by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in camps in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. This Iranian-sponsored training created a tempered and adaptive Iranian-backed Shia organization in Bahrain that internally threatens both the government of Bahrain and its neighboring Saudi patron.¹⁸¹ Instead of using a larger and overt military force against Saudi Arabia that could prompt a U.S. intervention, Iran exploits Saudi's domestic vulnerabilities and leverages internal social and religious cleavages to mobilize disenfranchised populations against the Kingdom.

¹⁷⁷ Knights and Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain," 23.

¹⁷⁸ Zambelis, "The Kingdom's Perfect Storm: Sectarian Tension and Terrorism in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province," 21–24.

¹⁷⁹ Knights and Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain," 18.

¹⁸⁰ Knights and Levitt, 18.

¹⁸¹ Knights and Levitt, 23.

d. Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's embryonic nuclear enrichment program has posed a growing, and possibly existential threat to the Saudi regime since the International Atomic Energy Agency discovered Iran's clandestine uranium enrichment program in the early 2000s.¹⁸² Iran pursues nuclear enrichment as a bulwark against foreign aggression and insists on maintaining its own nuclear fuel development due to lack of trust with the international community, perceived victimization under international sanctions, and decades of foreign intervention in the Middle East.¹⁸³ Under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran significantly rolled back its nuclear program—to include limiting its enrichment activities, number of reactors, and uranium stockpiles—in exchange for economic sanctions relief.¹⁸⁴ The unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement under the Trump administration, despite Iran's fulfillment of its obligations, shortly preceded ramped up U.S. economic sanctions against Iran.¹⁸⁵ The Trump administration cited the shortness of the agreement, as well as weak restrictions against Iran's ballistic missile arsenal as justification for breaking the deal.¹⁸⁶ In response, Iran reinvigorated its nuclear program. Iran has stated that its nuclear program is intended for peaceful purposes and condemned the United States for not honoring its obligations under JCPOA.¹⁸⁷ However, Saudi is concerned that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon due to its pursuit of uranium enrichment levels beyond the scope of peaceful civilian research.¹⁸⁸ Israel shares

¹⁸² Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 578.

¹⁸³ New York Times Editorial Board, "One Way Forward on Iran: A Nuclear-Weapons-Free Persian Gulf," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/opinion/sunday/iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Arms Control Association, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," Arms Control Association, July 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

¹⁸⁵ Arms Control Association, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance."

¹⁸⁶ Arms Control Association.

¹⁸⁷ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Khamenei Blames 'cowardly' U.S. for Pause in Nuclear Talks," *Reuters*, July 28, 2021, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-khamenei-blames-cowardly-us-pause-nuclear-talks-2021-07-28/>.

¹⁸⁸ Ghaida Ghantous, "Iran's Nuclear Activity Is Concerning, Says Saudi Official," *Reuters*, July 9, 2021, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-nuclear-activity-is-concerning-says-saudi-official-2021-07-09/>.

Saudi's concerns over an Iranian nuclear program and the two countries have conspired to derail Iran's nuclear program.¹⁸⁹

Iran's nuclear program has ramifications for Saudi Arabia and beyond the face value of Iran pursuing nuclear enrichment. Saudi Arabia believes that the health of Iran's nuclear program impacts Iran's ability to invest in its other military programs since Iran has to judiciously allocate its scarce economic resources, especially under crippling economic sanctions.¹⁹⁰ Consequently, Saudi Arabia objected to the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal which allowed Iran to fund its nuclear program through international donations, thereby conserving its own resources to sustain regional proxy militia forces that attack Saudi interests.¹⁹¹ However, lifting economic sanctions against the Iranian regime may not directly correlate to increased Iranian proxy force activity.¹⁹² Iran provides varying levels of financial, technological and training support to militant groups across the region that share mutual interests with Iran, but most of these groups would pursue these interests without Iranian sponsorship, albeit with more humble resources.¹⁹³ Additionally, Iranian proxy activity against Saudi Arabia increased following the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, and Iran signed a \$400 billion dollar investment deal with China in March 2021 to sidestep the impact of economic sanctions on the regime's financial resources.¹⁹⁴ Proxy force activity undoubtedly could be deadlier if Iran had additional resources to purchase more advanced weapons systems for its proxy groups. However, the uptick in proxy force activity appears more closely related to an uptick in Iran's discontent with the United

¹⁸⁹ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 443.

¹⁹⁰ Max Boot, "Opinion | The Right Is Wrong. Reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal Will Enhance Israel's Security.," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/26/gaza-war-isnt-an-argument-against-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

¹⁹¹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 398–99, 411; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

¹⁹² Boot, "Opinion: The Right Is Wrong. Reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal Will Enhance Israel's Security."

¹⁹³ Chipman and Staff, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 9.

¹⁹⁴ Boot, "Opinion: The Right Is Wrong. Reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal Will Enhance Israel's Security;" Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "China, With \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>.

States, Saudi Arabia and Israel's foreign policies towards and cooperation against Iran. Regardless, Saudi Arabia seeks a stronger international nuclear agreement that limits Iran's nuclear ambitions, as well as Iran's missile programs and proxy force activities.¹⁹⁵

Saudi Arabia is extremely concerned with Iran's progress towards developing a nuclear weapon. In July 2021 the International Atomic Energy Association and United Nations watchdog confirmed that Iran was enriching uranium up to 60 percent.¹⁹⁶ While nuclear weapons-grade uranium requires 90 percent enrichment, Iran's nuclear enrichment activities have far surpassed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)'s limit to 3.67 percent enrichment, as well as the 20 percent enrichment associated with civilian nuclear research reactor use.¹⁹⁷ In light of the breakdown of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and Iran's subsequent decision to reenergize its nuclear enrichment program outside of peaceful purposes, Saudi Arabia has considered developing its own nuclear weapons program as a deterrent against Iran.¹⁹⁸ Israel does not support Saudi's interest in pursuing a nuclear weapons program, but in the interim is equally dedicated to neutralizing Iran's nuclear enrichment program before Iran acquires a nuclear weapon.¹⁹⁹

B. SAUDI ARABIA'S REFORM INITIATIVES UNDER MBS

Compared to the two other main drivers of Saudi's cooperation with Israel—mutual concern over Iran and U.S. influence in the Middle East—reform under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is the most perplexing causal mechanism because it provides profound promise for enduring cooperation with Israel based on liberal theory,

¹⁹⁵ Francois Murphy, "Iran Has Enriched Uranium to up to 63% Purity, IAEA Says," *Reuters*, May 11, 2021, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-has-enriched-uranium-up-63-purity-iaea-report-says-2021-05-11/>.

¹⁹⁶ Murphy, "Iran Has Enriched Uranium to up to 63% Purity, IAEA Says."

¹⁹⁷ Robert E. Kelley, "Why Is Iran Producing 60 per Cent-Enriched Uranium?" *SIPRI*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 29, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2021/why-iran-producing-60-cent-enriched-uranium>.

¹⁹⁸ Nicholas L. Miller and Tristan A. Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1484224>.

¹⁹⁹ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 444.

but may be illusory based on the Saudi regime's history. In his Vision 2030 plan, MBS has outlined a series of progressive initiatives to overhaul Saudi's economy, stimulate international trade and foreign investment, enhance government transparency and accountability, and project tolerance and respect of all people.²⁰⁰ Theoretically, this driver has immense potential to forge enduring ties with Israel under a neoliberal institutionalist framework. However, in execution reform initiatives are a fine balance between the Saudi monarchy's fluctuating desire for progress and its traditional fixation on eradicating domestic threats to the regime's political authority.²⁰¹

1. Economic Opportunities

Out of all of the Middle Eastern countries, Israel is the most capable of contributing to Saudi's economic diversification.²⁰² In his Vision 2030 plan, MBS seeks to transform the health, technology and financial sectors, tackle water scarcity, diversify revenue and decrease oil dependence, extract Saudi's natural mineral resources, and develop human capital.²⁰³ Additionally, MBS and former Saudi politician and diplomat, Prince Turki bin Faisal, have publicly expressed the monarchy's interest in partnering with Israel's technological industry. Saudi's water purification and desertification prevention initiatives would also robustly benefit from Israel's agricultural expertise.²⁰⁴ With the second largest economy in the Middle East behind the United Arab Emirates and an international reputation for its technologically advanced medical, water engineering, agriculture, and mining sectors, Israel is "extraordinarily qualified" to assist Saudi Arabia in realizing the economic facet of Vision 2030.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Salman, "Leadership Message," Vision 2030, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/leadership-message/>.

²⁰¹ Priyanka Boghani, "The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social Reforms," *Frontline*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-paradox-of-saudi-arabias-social-reforms/>.

²⁰² Sabrina Malhi, "How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi's Vision 2030," Text, The Hill, October 11, 2016, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/300447-how-israel-can-contribute-to-saudis-vision-2030>.

²⁰³ Salman, "Leadership Message."

²⁰⁴ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 7.

²⁰⁵ Malhi, "How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi's Vision 2030."

2. Rejection of Extremist Ideology and Promotion of Religious Tolerance

MBS's initiatives to confront extremist ideology and advocate for religious tolerance push MBS towards Israel as a potential ally because the two countries largely encounter the same ideological threats.²⁰⁶ MBS has accelerated Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism threats. While MBS' predecessor, Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), dismantled Al Qaeda's network within Saudi Arabia and openly supported a range of nonstate actors to counter Sunni extremists and Iranian-sponsored proxy groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.²⁰⁷ However, MBN leveraged a more nuanced counterterrorism campaign, and used a gentle carrot-and-stick approach to neutralizing homegrown terrorism that focused on reforming and reintegrating Saudi extremists back into society.²⁰⁸ Conversely, in 2015 MBS announced a grandiose plan to establish an Islamic military coalition against terrorism based out of Riyadh, and initiated a jarring crackdown against domestic terrorism in 2017.²⁰⁹ It is unclear if MBS's relentless counterterrorism initiatives are born out of a sincere sense of duty to eradicate extremism from Saudi Arabia. Alternatively, MBS's counterterrorism zeal could have been a power move to make a name for himself in the international community, or an opportunity to implement domestic counterterrorism laws to methodically silence domestic criticism by legally incarcerating and executing peaceful citizen protesters.²¹⁰ Regardless, Saudi Arabia and Israel are confronting many of the same religiously motivated threats (the Palestinians being an outlier) emanating from Iran and Sunni extremist groups. If MBS is sincerely determined as he said to "coordinate and support the efforts to fight terrorism in all regions and parts

²⁰⁶ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 107.

²⁰⁷ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 411; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 35–36.

²⁰⁸ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 35–36.

²⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: New Counterterrorism Law Enables Abuse," Human Rights Watch, November 23, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-law-enables-abuse>; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 80–81.

²¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: New Counterterrorism Law Enables Abuse."

of the Islamic world,” it would be pragmatic and logical for him to consider that “the enemy of my [terrorist] enemy is my friend” in terms of Israel.²¹¹

Additionally, MBS’s religious tolerance initiatives lower Saudi’s traditional barriers to cooperating with Saudi Arabia. MBS’s Vision 2030 Religion and Tolerance Report reiterates that Saudi aspires to be a “country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the rest of the world.”²¹² The report cites evidence of progress towards Semitic tolerance in Saudi’s removal of anti-Semitic material from textbooks, as well as a January 2019 Saudi initiative to commemorate International Holocaust Memorial Day.²¹³ In contrast to his predecessors, MBS grew up in a highly globalized and information-based society, and witnessed the international community brand Saudi Arabia as an extremist incubator following 9/11.²¹⁴ As a result, MBS wants to shed Saudi Arabia’s hyper-conservative reputation.²¹⁵ Whereas his predecessors initiated policies to address extremism and promote a more moderate Saudi state following 9/11, they continued to prioritize the exportation of Wahhabism and Saudi’s responsibility to defend co-religionists.²¹⁶ Conversely, MBS has enlisted the religious establishment to legitimize religious tolerance as part of a return to Saudi’s “authentic roots,” which the monarchy claims were pluralistic, tolerant, and socially liberal.²¹⁷

²¹¹ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 80; Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018,” 585.

²¹² King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, “Vision 2030 and Reform in Saudi Arabia: Facts and Figures April 2015-April 2021” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, May 2021), 26.

²¹³ King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, “Vision 2030 and Reform in Saudi Arabia: Facts and Figures April 2015-April 2021,” 27–28.

²¹⁴ Jones and Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States,” 406.

²¹⁵ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, xiv.

²¹⁶ Jones and Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States,” 406; Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 107.

²¹⁷ Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 07, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

3. Fatigue with the Palestinian Cause

MBS' lack of sympathy for the Palestinian cause lowers Saudi political barriers for cooperating with Israel by diluting Saudi's traditional sense of responsibility to the Palestinians. Rob Malley, a senior White House official in the Obama administration who met with MBS on several occasions, remarked that "MBS comes from a generation of Saudi leaders that doesn't have a visceral, emotional attachment to the Palestinian cause."²¹⁸ Malley further commented that MBS considered the Palestinian issue of self-determination "an annoying irritant—a problem to be overcome rather than a conflict to be fairly solved."²¹⁹ However, MBS is cognizant of the ramifications of pursuing a normalization agreement with Israel, stating that such an agreement would result in him being "killed by Iran, Qatar, and [his] own people."²²⁰ Additionally, the recent Al-Aqsa Mosque clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian protesters have unquestionably inflamed traditional anti-Semitic sentiments amongst the Saudi monarchy, religious establishment and Saudi citizens alike, reinforcing the fundamental and unchanged tenet of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward Israel, at least temporarily.²²¹ Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia is distancing itself from the Palestinians based on Hamas' ties to terrorism and Iran, which if exacerbated over time could result in Saudi reneging on its traditional obligations to the Palestinians in Israel's favor.²²²

C. U.S. INFLUENCE (OR LACK THEREOF)

Lastly, of all three main drivers, U.S. influence in the Middle East has the broadest and quickest potential to impact Saudi's cooperative arrangement with Israel due to U.S. retrenchment from the region and its disaffection with the Saudi monarchy. The United States

²¹⁸ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 224.

²¹⁹ Hubbard, 224.

²²⁰ Middle East Eye Staff, "MBS Said He Would Be Killed by His 'own People' If Riyadh Normalised Ties with Israel: Report," *Middle East Eye*, October 23, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/mbs-normalisation-saudi-israel-killed>.

²²¹ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 433,442,446; Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 585.

²²² Amer, "What Is Behind the Saudi Campaign Against Hamas?"

provided the initial impetus for Saudi and Israel to view the pragmatic benefits of coordinating their activities in the region, and nurtured diplomatic ties between the two states over the last several decades.²²³ Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Israel base their regional security strategies on the U.S. willingness and ability to project strategic leadership across the region, and more importantly when the United States is unwilling or unable to do so.²²⁴ Shared disdain over the Obama administration's handling of Iran, abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and overall U.S. retrenchment from the region in light of two ongoing wars in the Middle East in Iraq and Afghanistan caused Saudi Arabia and Israel to question the reliability of the United States as a long-standing patron, and drew the Kingdom and Jewish state towards cooperating together.²²⁵

While the Trump administration improved relations with Saudi Arabia between 2016–2020 and further fostered ties between Saudi and Israel, it is unclear how a new Biden administration will alter this dynamic in the long term, or if relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia will improve with the next administration. However, it is clear that Saudi Arabia cannot depend on the United States in the near term, or as a long term reliable partner.²²⁶ While Saudi has benefited from decades of U.S. political and military backing, President Joe Biden seeks to shrink the U.S. presence in the Middle East, withdraw U.S. support to Saudi's war in Yemen and negotiate with Iran on its nuclear program—a distinct and alarming change to the previous U.S. administration policy on Saudi.²²⁷ Even if the next administration mends any potential bad blood between the United States and Saudi from the Biden administration, an unpredictable and vacillating relationship with the United States is not compatible with Saudi's regional security objectives.

²²³ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 445-446.

²²⁴ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 399; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

²²⁵ Rynhold and Yaari, 3.

²²⁶ Bill Bostock, "Saudi Arabia Is Trying to Patch Things up with Bitter Rivals Iran and Turkey, Showing MBS Knows the U.S. Isn't Batting for Him Anymore." Business Insider, May 14, 2021. <https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-iran-turkey-talks-mbs-knows-us-support-not-guaranteed-2021-5>.

²²⁷ Bostock, "Saudi Arabia Is Trying to Patch Things up with Bitter Rivals Iran and Turkey, Showing MBS Knows the U.S. Isn't Batting for Him Anymore."

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IV. SCENARIOS THAT PROMOTE OR INHIBIT SAUDI ARABIA'S COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

The previous chapter explained how the main drivers of Saudi cooperation with Israel—mutual concern over Iran, Saudi's secular reforms under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and U.S. influence—have encouraged Saudi Arabia's cooperation initiatives with Israel over the last two decades. This chapter explores scenarios that could promote a closer cooperative relationship between the two states, as well as scenarios that could inhibit and/or deteriorate their cooperative arrangement. To gain a more holistic understanding of this highly dynamic problem set, this chapter concludes by exploring from a macro perspective how a change in one category of drivers of cooperation impacts the other two categories of drivers. Ultimately, this chapter argues that these drivers form an interactive system of influence that push and pull on Saudi Arabia's highly dynamic cooperative arrangement with Israel, and that none of these drivers are constant.

A. CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE SAUDI ARABIA'S COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

Saudi Arabia's military and diplomatic cooperation with Israel against Iran, albeit discreet, is furthered by neorealist Kenneth Waltz' idea of power balancing—"allying in opposition to the principal source of danger."²²⁸ For Saudi Arabia, Iran is one of the largest military and ideological threats to the Kingdom and the Middle East writ large, and Israel is a regional power that shares that same perspective. An increase in their mutual perception of an Iranian threat has the potential to galvanize their cooperation initiatives to counter Iran's power. Additionally, the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 plan offers pragmatic economic opportunities for the Kingdom to strengthen ties with Israel, but more importantly advocates for increased religious tolerance and an aversion to extremist ideology that could lower Saudi's domestic traditional barriers for cooperating with Israel.

²²⁸ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010), 125–26; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 4.

These opportunities could evolve into a meaningful and enduring cooperative relationship. Lastly, Saudi's relationship with the United States as a partner, mentor, weapons dealer and security guarantor is waning under the current U.S. administration. As the United States distances itself from its Saudi client, Saudi will have to adjust by increasing its political and military standing in the region, perhaps by establishing a stronger partnership with Israel—whose pragmatic values best align with Saudi's political aspirations. It is unclear how many of these variables need to be actualized or in what order they need to be actualized to achieve normalized relations between the two countries. However, progress in any of these variables will improve cooperative ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, short of normalization.

1. Iran Increases Its Regional Influence

Saudi fears of a Shia crescent—a geographical land arc emanating from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria where the region's Shia population is concentrated—that could be controlled by Iran-backed non-state actors have nurtured Saudi Arabia's warming attitude towards Israel because of the ideological and military threat Iran poses to them both.²²⁹ There is not a substantive body of reporting to suggest that Israel aids Saudi Arabia in combatting its domestic Iran-backed Shia unrest. However, Mossad—one of Israel's primary intelligence services—has long provided Saudi Arabia with intelligence information and equipment that arguably could be used by the Saudi monarchy to identify and target Iranian-backed internal threats.²³⁰ Even if Israel is not directly assisting the Saudis to quell internal dissent, providing Saudi the means to do so indirectly contributes to Saudi maintaining its political power, and fosters positive relations between the two states.

External to Saudi Arabia, both the Kingdom and Israel desire to eradicate Iran's influence over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Israel benefit from Iran influencing the Palestinian people. Saudi Arabia loses influence as the protector of the

²²⁹ Reza Parchizadeh, "The Shiite Crescent: The Middle East's Arc of Crisis," *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), March 7, 2021, <https://besacenter.org/shiite-crescent-crisis/>; Podedh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 575.

²³⁰ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 444.

Sunni people and advocate for Palestinian self-determination, and Israel has to tackle its prolonged conflict with the Palestinians that is now further complicated and prolonged by Iranian influence and support. Iran has established a material and politically-incentivized client— Hamas— that allows Sunni Palestinians to increase Iran’s military advantage against their perceived Israeli oppressors, while inadvertently spreading Iran’s influence and revolutionary ideology—and thereby decreasing Saudi Arabia’s influence— throughout the region. Iran’s public support to the Palestinians and covert proxy activities with Hamas allows Iran to develop an additional client relationship at the expense of Saudi’s regional influence.

Iran is building its reputation as a defender of non-Shia Islamic co-religionists (at the expense of Saudi Arabia) and expanding its influence within Israel’s borders by supporting the Palestinians—a dynamic that is unpalatable to both Saudi Arabia and Israel. Between March and May 2021, Ayatollah Khamenei and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif made over 45 statements on their social media platforms, “proudly [standing] with [the] Palestinian people—who resist the brutality of an apartheid regime.”²³¹ Furthermore, during a televised speech in early May 2021 in recognition of Iran’s annual Quds Day—a day of protest on the last Friday of Ramadan to express solidarity with the Sunni Palestinians and opposition to Israel—Ayatollah Khamenei declared it an Iranian “public duty to fight against [Israel],” as the “fight against oppression and the fight against terrorism.”²³² Saudi and Israel cooperating against Iran’s influence of the Palestinian people is a tall order, since Saudi Arabia regularly condemns Israel’s policies and actions directed against the Palestinians. Any cooperative efforts in this arena would have to be discreet and out of the public sphere to not tarnish Saudi’s religious obligations to the Palestinians. If nothing else, Iran’s relationship of convenience with Hamas remains a

²³¹ Ali Khamenei, “Statements from Imam Sayyid Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader,” (Twitter, n.d.), https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir; Javad Zarif, “Javad Zarif: Iran Government Official, Husband, Father, Grandfather, Associate Professor, Foreign Minister,” (Twitter, n.d.), <https://twitter.com/JZarif>; Javad Zarif, “Palestine Is a Yardstick for Justice. Few Measure Up.” (Twitter, May 6, 2021), <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1390240803247861762>.

²³² Parisa Hafezi, “Iran’s Khamenei Says Fight against Israel Is a Public Duty,” Reuters, May 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-khamenei-says-fight-against-israel-is-public-duty-2021-05-07/>.

mutual frustration for Saudi Arabia and Israel that could drive cooperation in other military and diplomatic activities that curb Iran's overall influence in the region.

2. Iran Advances Its Nuclear Program

Scholars agree that shared concerns about Iran's nuclear program drive diplomatic and military cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel.²³³ In response to Iran's reinvigoration of its nuclear program, Saudi Arabia and Israel have shared intelligence, Israel has upgraded Saudi Arabia's intelligence surveillance equipment, and Saudi has approved overflight permissions for the Israelis in support of their strike operations against Iran's nuclear facilities.²³⁴ If Iran continues to advance its nuclear program without any form of rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the strategic context of Saudi Arabia and Israel's pragmatic relationship endures to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.²³⁵

The impending renegotiation of the JCPOA agreement complicates Saudi Arabia and Israel's strategic cooperation, and depending on the renegotiation terms, has the potential to either expand or derail their warming relations. In June 2021, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett expressed Israel's staunch opposition to renegotiating JCPOA in June 2021, echoing his predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu's belief that a renegotiated JCPOA would have disastrous consequences for Israeli national security.²³⁶ Saudi Arabia is more amenable to reinvigorating the JCPOA deal than Israel is, but advocates for a longer-lasting nuclear deal with stronger parameters that limits all three of Iran's strategic programs.²³⁷ A JCPOA renegotiation hypothetically could reinforce Saudi Arabia and

²³³ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

²³⁴ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 443–44; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

²³⁵ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 444.

²³⁶ *New York Times* Editorial Board, "One Way Forward on Iran: A Nuclear-Weapons-Free Persian Gulf;" Lahav Harkov, "Bennett Plans to Continue Netanyahu's Iran Policies," *The Jerusalem Post*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/bennett-plans-to-continue-netanyahu-iran-policies-670883>.

²³⁷ Ghaida Ghantous, "Saudi Official: Expanded Talks Should Follow Any Iran Nuclear Deal," Reuters, April 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-official-expanded-talks-should-follow-any-iran-nuclear-deal-2021-04-14/>.

Israel's strategic cooperation against Iran if the new agreement lifts economic sanctions against Iran without strictly regulating Iran's nuclear program, as well as without reining in Iran's proxy forces across the region.

It is unclear how Saudi Arabia and Israel's relationship would respond to Iran enriching uranium to 90 percent and successfully creating a nuclear weapon that it could effectively deliver against its enemies. At the very least, Saudi Arabia and Israel would both feel less secure as Iran's security drastically increases with the attainment of a nuclear bomb. It would be far easier for Saudi and Israel to cooperate in military attacks against Iran's nuclear infrastructure now—through cyber means or air strikes—while Iran has latent nuclear capability than it would be for the two countries to cooperate against a nuclear-armed Iran. Israel at least maintains a form of nuclear deterrence against Iran by being a nuclear power, but Saudi Arabia does not have that luxury. Saudi Arabia is not a nuclear power and does not have a nuclear security guarantor to make assurances of its safety. In the scenario that Iran gets the bomb, Saudi Arabia would have to make a choice to either pursue its own nuclear weapons or convince another nuclear power to bring Saudi under its nuclear umbrella, which leads into multiple scenarios that could inhibit Saudi's cooperation with Israel.

3. MBS Becomes King

If MBS ascends to the Saudi throne, Saudi's rapprochement with Israel could accelerate because MBS would be less constrained by traditional barriers to cooperation with Israel.²³⁸ As the Crown Prince, MBS is second in line to the throne and expected to succeed his father, King Salman. However, MBS's succession is not guaranteed. While MBS has enacted rapid and radical restructuring of the Saudi governance system that increases the monarchy's political and religious power, MBS is still forced to navigate through considerations of family in-fighting and power moves, domestic opinion, and most importantly the backing of the religious establishment.²³⁹ MBS's rise to Crown Prince

²³⁸ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 225.

²³⁹ Brown and Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States."

angered many of the other royals—those who were passed over in succession to the throne, those who have been silenced, or those who viewed his leadership and outlook as dangerous to the monarchy—and drew negative attention to the entire ruling family for his military campaign in Yemen and connection to the murder of journalist Jamaal Khashoggi.²⁴⁰ If MBS ascends the throne after his father dies, he will still be required to honor the House of Saud’s alliance with the Wahhabi clergy to maintain the monarchy’s political legitimacy. However, he will be less constrained by royal family politics as his seniority and authority will no longer be in question.

While King Salman is still alive, MBS must maintain his father’s confidence and endorsement to avoid being replaced by a less controversial, and perhaps less ambitious prince that could derail cooperative ties with Israel. However, King Salman is 85 years old and his health and mental acuity are in decline. MBS has positioned himself as the gatekeeper to the king and the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. If anything would have convinced King Salman to replace MBS, it likely would have been MBS’s association with Khashoggi’s murder due to the extraordinary international blowback on the Kingdom. However, MBS retained his father’s endorsement, has sidelined royal opposition, and overhauled the religious establishment to largely endorse his political aspirations, including the slow process of acclimating the Saudi people to increased religious tolerance in favor of the Jewish state.²⁴¹

4. Economic Cooperation with Israel

A mutually beneficial economic partnership between Saudi Arabia and Israel is a solid foundation for creating deep-rooted ties that could accelerate rapprochement between the two countries.²⁴² Diversifying Saudi’s revenue sources and mining for natural resources—such as gold, phosphate and uranium—are integral to overhauling Saudi’s economy and establishing the Kingdom as an epicenter of trade, which Israel is fully

²⁴⁰ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 268.

²⁴¹ Brown and Brown, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States.”

²⁴² Malhi, “How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi’s Vision 2030.”

qualified to address.²⁴³ Cooperating with Israel on small economic projects could build to cooperating with Israel on large economic projects that foster interconnectedness over time. Israel and Saudi would mutually benefit under a neoliberal institutionalist idea of economic interdependence where economic ties slowly build to political ties over time due to the increasing disadvantage to fighting wars with economic partners.²⁴⁴

5. Saudi Arabia Prosecutes Extremist Ideology and Promotes Religious Tolerance

MBS's energized initiatives to counter extremist ideology and organizations throughout the region underscores Saudi and Israel's common interest in fighting terrorism. Israel traditionally viewed Saudi Arabia as a fanatical religious state and sponsor of terrorism, due largely to its past financial support to the Palestinians and its connections to 9/11.²⁴⁵ However, Saudi has drastically changed its stance on terrorism—both home grown and abroad. Additionally, there is not a significant body of reporting to suggest that Saudi and Israel currently cooperate in counterterrorism operations beyond intelligence sharing, military sales and Saudi overflight permissions for Israeli military aircraft.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, developing mutual trust in small scale military activities can build to cooperating on larger military objectives, and the lack of information on Saudi and Israel's current military cooperation could largely be a result of the secretive nature of their joint operations.²⁴⁷ Regardless, their compatibility as counterterrorism partners is an area of academia that would benefit from additional scholarship. Additionally, leveraging the religious establishment to guide Saudi citizens away from anti-Semitic cultural bigotry would allow the Saudi monarchy to maintain its religious and political credibility in

²⁴³ Salman, "Leadership Message"; Malhi, "How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi's Vision 2030."

²⁴⁴ Bruce M. Russett, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001), 130.

²⁴⁵ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 584.

²⁴⁶ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 443–44; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

²⁴⁷ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 444.

increasing its cooperative counterterrorism initiatives, and broader political relationship with Israel.²⁴⁸

6. Saudi Arabia Abandons the Palestinian Cause

While Saudi's demands for Palestinian self-determination appear intractable, there is evidence of subtle changes within Saudi leadership and domestic public opinion that could at the very least change the parameters of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. There is a qualitative shift and greater sensitivity in Riyadh's recognition of the of the Jewish state's legitimacy and its security concerns.²⁴⁹ Influential Saudis have become more open in their dealings with Israel and demonstrated "thinly veiled support" for Israel's response to Palestinian activities.²⁵⁰ Additionally, MBS's lack of sympathy for the Palestinians, compounded by his commitment to eradicating extremist ideology from the region and the religious establishment's push for religious tolerance, lowers Saudi's traditional barriers to cooperation with Israel out of loyalty to the Palestinian people. The right combination of reform initiatives, coupled with Hamas increasing its terrorist activities and ties to Iran could change this dynamic in Israel's favor.

7. The United States Withdraws from the Middle East

U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East could galvanize cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel if the other two primary drivers of cooperation—mutual concern with Iran and Saudi's reform initiatives—remain unscathed because Saudi and Israel share significant common interests in their desire for security, peace, and economic prosperity in the region. MBS has verbalized tremendous admiration for Israel and their mutual interests, and is not threatened by Israel in the region's current balance of power configuration.²⁵¹ If the Biden administration shrinks the U.S. military presence in the Middle East,

²⁴⁸ Farouk and Brown. "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention."

²⁴⁹ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 413; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 1,6.

²⁵⁰ Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 410–11.

²⁵¹ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 222–23.

withdraws its support to Saudi's war in Yemen, and distances itself both politically and militarily with Saudi Arabia, the consequences could be similar to Saudi and Israel's response to the Obama administration's disaffection with Saudi Arabia. Saudi and Israel could continue to cooperate on narrow military objectives until a friendlier U.S. administration comes into power.

8. The United States Fosters Better Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel

The United States has historically exhibited a moderating effect between Saudi Arabia and Israel that has reduced their mutual hostility over time.²⁵² Losing the United States as a security guarantor deepens Saudi's feelings of insecurity, but the United States could still influence how Saudi responds to that renewed sense of insecurity.²⁵³ The Biden administration has clearly articulated that it will continue to support both Saudi Arabia outside of the Yemen war, as well as Israel, but has renewed its focus on democratic values that conflict with Saudi and Israel's human rights records against journalists and the Shia minority in Saudi, and the Palestinians in Israel.²⁵⁴ The United States is limiting its military footprint, but not its influence. However, it "must find a way to pair reductions in military commitments with gains in regional stability."²⁵⁵ The Biden administration can champion democratic values and encourage a meaningful relationship between its two largest partners in the region—Saudi Arabia and Israel—as part of securing regional stability in the absence of a U.S. footprint.

²⁵² Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 446.

²⁵³ Bostock, "Saudi Arabia Is Trying to Patch Things up with Bitter Rivals Iran and Turkey, Showing MBS Knows the U.S. Isn't Batting for Him Anymore."

²⁵⁴ Shaun Tandon, "Reframing Mideast, Biden Seems to Signal New Distance from Allies Israel, Saudis," *The Times of Israel*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/reframing-mideast-biden-takes-new-distance-from-allies-israel-saudi-arabia/>.

²⁵⁵ Vali Nasr and Maria Fantappie, "How Iran and Saudi Arabia Can Together Bring Peace to the Middle East," August 5, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2021-08-03/how-iran-and-saudi-arabia-can-together-bring-peace-middle-east>.

B. CONDITIONS THAT INHIBIT SAUDI ARABIA'S COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

Conversely, if the regional balance of power changes to increase the security of Saudi Arabia or Israel at the expense of the other, the strategic context of their cooperation would change, likely for the worse. Additionally, while MBS's reform initiatives have significant potential to further cooperative ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, they are also fragile and susceptible to disruption. Rapprochement between the Kingdom and Jewish State would severely suffer, and their relationship could revert to historical animosity and adversarial tension if MBS does not ascend the Saudi throne as king and/or the Kingdom defaults on its reform initiatives. Lastly, as the United States distances itself from its Saudi client, the Kingdom could increase its political and military standing in the region by reconciling with previous rivals such as Iran—whose ideological values do not align with Saudi and whose partnership would isolate Saudi from Israel, but would guarantee Saudi's physical security. Similarly to conditions that would promote increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, it is also unclear how many of these variables need to be actualized, or in what order they need to be actualized to completely derail a cooperative relationship between the two countries. However, progress of any of these variables will undoubtedly impede Saudi and Israel's existing and future cooperative efforts.

1. Saudi Arabia Pursues a Nuclear Weapon

Saudi Arabia considered developing its own nuclear weapons program as a deterrent against Iran long before the breakdown of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and Iran's subsequent decision to reenergize its nuclear enrichment program.²⁵⁶ In 2010, late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz reportedly stated to U.S. officials that "if Iran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia."²⁵⁷ While Saudi Arabia and Israel's strategic cooperation endures against Iran, Israel does not support Saudi Arabia's pursuit of a

²⁵⁶ Miller and Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia." 27.

²⁵⁷ Miller and Volpe, 27.

nuclear weapons program and would disrupt progress in their cooperation initiatives because Israel is concerned with maintaining its military advantage.²⁵⁸ While Saudi Arabia and Israel are on good terms now, Israel is concerned that if the Saudi monarchy were overthrown, Saudi's nuclear weapons would be refocused towards Israel by a hostile replacement regime.²⁵⁹ Saudi Arabia began investing in the physical infrastructure, human capital, and technology required for a large-scale nuclear power program following the international community's 2015 adoption of the JCPOA agreement.²⁶⁰ Even if Iran had not reinvigorated its nuclear enrichment program following the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, the agreement only stalled Iran's nuclear program for 15 years.²⁶¹ Saudi Arabia had already planned to pursue a latent nuclear weapons capacity as part of its longer term nuclear hedging strategy against Iran.²⁶² Saudi framed the nuclear program investment as part of a peaceful energy diversification plan. However, its development of a latent nuclear capacity most notably aligned with a decade-old warning that it would pursue nuclear weapons in response to Iran's development of nuclear weapons.²⁶³

It is possible (but unlikely in the current political environment) that a nuclear Saudi Arabia could deter Iran from regional aggression and thereby extend Israel's nuclear deterrence against Iran under an expanded cooperative arrangement with Israel.²⁶⁴ Or a nuclear Saudi Arabia could initiate a regional arms race, tip the balance of power in the Middle East, and jeopardize Israel's military advantage that ensures its survival against its

²⁵⁸ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 8; Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 414; Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007), 170, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=445551>.

²⁵⁹ Raphael Ahren, "If the Enemy of My Enemy Gets the Bomb: Saudi Nuclear Plan Gives Israel Headache," *The Times of Israel*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/if-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-gets-the-bomb-saudi-nuclear-plan-gives-israel-headache/>.

²⁶⁰ Miller and Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia." 27–28.

²⁶¹ New York Times Editorial Board, "One Way Forward on Iran: A Nuclear-Weapons-Free Persian Gulf."

²⁶² Miller and Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia," 28.

²⁶³ Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 8.

²⁶⁴ Ahren, "If the Enemy of My Enemy Gets the Bomb: Saudi Nuclear Plan Gives Israel Headache."

enemies. Saudi's pursuit of a nuclear weapons program would at the very least create an intermission to its cooperative arrangement with Israel as Israel weighs its response options. All other regional dynamics remaining the same, reverting to hostility towards Saudi Arabia could drastically reduce the already minimal number of partners Israel has in the region, create a larger Arab-Israeli schism, and increase the likelihood of military confrontation between states. Israel is not willing to gamble on its survival and for now maintains a clear and consistent policy that no other Middle Eastern country should have nuclear weapons.²⁶⁵ Saudi's pursuit of a nuclear weapon would contradict that policy, derail their cooperative arrangement, and reinvigorate adversarial tension between the two states.

To prevent Saudi Arabia's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, and thereby maintain Saudi and Israel's cooperative arrangement, Israel likely would first seek U.S. assistance in curbing Saudi Arabia's nuclear aspirations. As a lasting partner to Saudi Arabia, the United States could effectively intervene and either extend its nuclear umbrella over Saudi Arabia or sign a U.S. Atomic Energy Act "123 agreement" to provide the United States "enhanced insight and influence into the evolution of the Saudi nuclear energy program."²⁶⁶ Lastly, Israel could offer to bring Saudi Arabia underneath its own nuclear umbrella as an effective strategy to roll back Saudi's aspirational nuclear weapons program. However, this is an unlikely course of action that Israel is not prepared to extend. It would also be difficult to implement without first normalizing their relations, which is dependent on first resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. None of the available options to temper Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions are simple or straightforward. However, it is clear that Saudi Arabia's pursuit of nuclear weapons would radically alter its current cooperative arrangement with Israel, more likely for the worse.

In the opposite direction, the effect of Saudi's increased cooperation with Israel on Saudi's nuclear ambitions is an area of academia that requires additional scholarly attention. It does not appear that Saudi Arabia and Israel's cooperative arrangement has

²⁶⁵ Ahren, "If the Enemy of My Enemy Gets the Bomb: Saudi Nuclear Plan Gives Israel Headache."

²⁶⁶ Miller and Volpe, "Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia," 31.

drastically tempered Saudi's nuclear ambitions because their relationship is inconsistent and does not extend beyond periodic opportunities to work together against Iran. The Saudi regime has to navigate through significant ideological barriers, such as the Palestinian question and the monarchy's patriarchal tradition of animosity towards Israel, before feeling secure enough to abandon its nuclear aspirations in exchange for possible extended nuclear deterrence through Israel.²⁶⁷ Additionally, Israel has not conveyed a willingness to bring Saudi Arabia under its nuclear umbrella as an incentive for Saudi Arabia to comfortably abandon its nuclear ambitions. Israel likely would welcome a normalization agreement from Saudi Arabia, but that agreement would not surmount Israel's skepticism towards the Islamic world, conditioned by decades of conflict with its neighboring countries.²⁶⁸ A relationship that allows Israel to satisfy Saudi Arabia's underlying motivations for pursuing nuclear weapons is a distant prospect. Without alleviating Saudi Arabia and Israel's concerns over Iran's nuclear program and Saudi remaining non-nuclear, the strategic context of Saudi Arabia and Israel's relationship endures.²⁶⁹

2. Iran Reconciles with Saudi Arabia

Saudi rapprochement with Iran has the most potential to derail Israel's cooperative arrangement because Saudi and Israel's mutual concern with Iran is the cornerstone of their relationship.²⁷⁰ While reconciliation with Iran runs counter to Saudi's expressed reform initiatives and desire to limit Iran's nuclear activities, Saudi and Iran engaged in secret diplomatic talks in April 2021, corresponding with MBS's diplomatic campaign to repair relationships with Saudi's rivals in the Middle East.²⁷¹ Iran's recent attempts to reconcile with Saudi Arabia directly could be indicative of Iran's growing insecurity over Saudi's increased cooperation with Israel, or part of Iran's revolutionary strategy to decrease

²⁶⁷ Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 564–65.

²⁶⁸ Ahren, "If the Enemy of My Enemy Gets the Bomb: Saudi Nuclear Plan Gives Israel Headache."

²⁶⁹ Wade L. Huntley, "The Abolition Aspiration," *The Nonproliferation Review* 17, no. 1 (March 2010): 150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700903484710>.

²⁷⁰ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 433; Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel, From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," 585.

²⁷¹ Bostock, "Saudi Arabia Is Trying to Patch Things up with Bitter Rivals Iran and Turkey, Showing MBS Knows the U.S. Isn't Batting for Him Anymore."

Western influence in the region by creating separation between Saudi Arabia and the United States.²⁷² Additionally, Saudi Arabia has signaled a recent willingness to negotiate with Iran to de-escalate tensions across the region due to inconsistent U.S. security guarantees, ongoing U.S. nuclear negotiations with Iran, as well as U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East.²⁷³

Rapprochement with Iran could deliver immediate positive results for Riyadh by easing domestic pressure and military expenditures—ending the costly war in Yemen with the Iranian-backed Houthis, halting Iranian military attacks against Saudi infrastructure, expanding Saudi influence in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, and reducing the domestic Shia threat in Saudi.²⁷⁴ However, Saudi and Iran have different short-term ambitions in their talks. Iran remains committed to its ongoing shadow war of assassinations, cyber-attacks and sabotage with Israel, and wants to obstruct Saudi and Israel from aligning against Iran.²⁷⁵ To that end, Iran wants full normalization of relations with Saudi-Arabia, but Riyadh wants its security concerns addressed first.²⁷⁶ Saudi is unlikely to commit to full normalization with Iran and abandoning any prospects of economic and military cooperation with Israel without first receiving significant concessions.

Iran would have to significantly improve its diplomatic and military interactions with Saudi Arabia to convince Saudi to abandon its cooperative arrangement with Israel. Based on the historical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iranian concessions possibly would include a scaling back of its anti-Wahhabi rhetoric, a willingness to split the Middle East in terms of influencing Sunni and Shia Muslim populations, a withdrawal of proxy force activities that negatively impact Saudi Arabia (which Iran does not have full operational control over), and a willingness to establish at least neutral diplomatic relations

²⁷² Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East.*, 150.

²⁷³ Ali Harb, “Saudi Arabia-Iran Rapprochement: What Is Driving Push for Diplomacy?,” Middle East Eye, May 5, 2021, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-iran-rapprochement-push-diplomacy>.

²⁷⁴ Nasr and Fantappie, “How Iran and Saudi Arabia Can Together Bring Peace to the Middle East.”

²⁷⁵ Malhi, “How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi’s Vision 2030.”

²⁷⁶ Nasr and Fantappie, “How Iran and Saudi Arabia Can Together Bring Peace to the Middle East.”

with the United States. However, conflict is integral to Iran justifying its juristic guardianship and maintaining its revolutionary momentum.²⁷⁷ It therefore seems highly unlikely that Iran would be able to deliver such promises since they are antithetical to Iran's revolutionary ideology that upholds the Iranian regime. A more realistic scenario would be for Iran to maintain its revolutionary momentum, but scale back its directed efforts against Saudi to make room for increased diplomacy. While such a scenario likely would not offer enough incentive for Saudi to abandon the marginal security benefits it receives in its cooperative relationship with Israel, it would certainly give the relationship between Saudi and Israel pause. Regardless of Saudi or Iran's motivations for reconciling, normalizing relations between the two countries would completely de-rail Saudi and Israel's current cooperative arrangement against Iran with Saudi and Iran reconciling, while Iran and Israel remain in adversarial tension.

3. MBS Does Not Become King

Although unlikely, it is still worth noting that a replacement to MBS likely would not be as progressive and would instead default to traditional Arab principles that the monarchy, religious establishment and Saudi people have been accustomed to. Considering that MBS has nurtured an ironclad relationship with his father that allowed him to skip other royals in succession to the throne, buffer himself from royal criticism, and overhaul the Saudi government and religious structures to consolidate his power, the writing is on the wall that MBS will be the next king of Saudi Arabia. Since the Wahhabi clerical establishment has overseen all transitions of power and social reform within the Saudi state, it is always possible that a group of royals could conspire against the future king with the help of Wahhabi clerics that have been sidelined under MBS.²⁷⁸ However, MBS has insulated himself from royal and clerical backlash by imprisoning family members,

²⁷⁷ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 27.

²⁷⁸ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 60–61.

leveraging the regime-sponsored Council of Senior Scholars, and relying on the tradition of *Al Wala' wal Bara*.²⁷⁹

4. MBS's Reform Initiatives Fail

If MBS does not realize his Vision 2030 Plan for Saudi Arabia, Israel will not have the opportunity to invest in Saudi's economic infrastructure and slowly build political ties. This scenario limits the opportunities for Saudi and Israel to further their cooperation in palatable terms to Saudi citizens. The 2019 coronavirus pandemic hit Saudi's economic sector hard with plummeting oil prices, financial market disruption, a decrease in tourism, and loss of production in the government and private sectors.²⁸⁰ Additionally, Saudi has a robust 70 year track record of the United States championing Saudi's reform and tolerance initiatives, followed by Saudi's default on those initiatives and relapse into ultra-conservatism when faced with popular uprising.²⁸¹ Despite increasing authoritarianism within Saudi, MBS has spearheaded "perhaps the most far-reaching alterations" to the Saudi governance system since its founding, so he may in fact be a visionary for moderation.²⁸² The jury is still out as to whether his reform initiatives will result in economic prosperity and favorable political relations with Israel, or an authoritarian-induced uprising similar to the Arab Spring.

5. Saudi Arabia Reinvigorates Support to the Palestinians

If MBS reverted to the Saudi monarchy's traditional backing of the Palestinians via financial support, he would derail Saudi and Israel's cooperative arrangement because Saudi in effect would be enabling an indirect Palestinian offensive against the Israelis.

²⁷⁹ Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia;" Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 214, 268.

²⁸⁰ Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, "Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review" (The Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Center For the Middle East, June 2020).

²⁸¹ Abdullah Al-Arian, "Seventy Years of the New York Times Describing Saudi Royals as Reformers," *Jadaliyya*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34727>; Boghani, "The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social Reforms."

²⁸² Farouk and Brown. "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention."

While MBS personally lacks sympathy for the Palestinian cause, it is still a critical component of maintaining the Saudi monarchy's political legitimacy—forged in their role as custodians of the Two Holy Mosques and protector of Muslims—because it is one of the few issues that arouses broad and genuine support across the Middle East and Muslim diaspora.²⁸³ Admittedly, this course of action is unlikely because the Saudi monarchy has distanced itself from the Palestinians—specifically Hamas—due to their connections to terrorism and Iran.²⁸⁴ Additionally, the Saudi monarchy has successfully balanced its international and religious legitimacy by harshly criticizing Israel and Hamas simultaneously, thereby exhibiting support to the Palestinian cause short of terrorist operations, while not significantly threatening Israel.²⁸⁵ Nonetheless, if MBS were facing significant domestic and international backlash from the Muslim community, and improved his relations with Iran that in turn would temper Hamas, Saudi's resumption of financial support to the Palestinians could be a viable consideration. Whether as a solitary move, or coordinated effort with other drivers that inhibit Saudi's cooperation with Israel, Saudi's funding of the Palestinian cause against Israel would break down the cooperative arrangement between the Kingdom and Jewish state, and likely incite increased hostility between the two countries.

6. The United States Withdraws from the Middle East and Abandons Saudi Arabia

If the United States withdraws from the Middle East without giving Saudi Arabia credible assurances of its commitment to protect the Kingdom, as well as encouragement to work towards regional stability with other Middle Eastern states (it does not have to be Israel), Saudi may panic and establish strange bedfellows like Iran whose ideology is irreconcilable with the United States. Saudi deeply depends on the United States in guaranteeing its physical security. Without that promise, Saudi is vulnerable to malign

²⁸³ Shadi Hamid, "A Separate Peace? What the Gaza Crisis Means for Arab Regimes," *Brookings*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/16/a-separate-peace-what-the-gaza-crisis-means-for-arab-regimes/>.

²⁸⁴ Amer, "What Is behind the Saudi Campaign against Hamas?"

²⁸⁵ Hamid, "A Separate Peace? What the Gaza Crisis Means for Arab Regimes."

actors, making this course of action a wild card. With all other factors constant, U.S. abandonment of Saudi could further push Saudi towards Israel in a realist balance-of-power scramble against Iran. Alternatively, it could inspire a Saudi nuclear program or normalization of relations with Iran that diminish Israel's sense of security and cripple any pre-existing cooperative arrangement.

7. The United States Improves Relations with Iran

If the United States repairs its diplomatic relationship with Iran or encourages Saudi and Iran to normalize relations, Saudi Arabia and Israel's cooperative relationship would shatter because Israel would be the lone scapegoat against Iranian aggression. Right now there is a significant push within academia that Washington can bring peace to the Middle East by encouraging dialogue between "the region's two most consequential antagonists: Iran and Saudi Arabia."²⁸⁶ However, this idea is short-sighted and relies on the assumption that decreasing the U.S. presence from the region would alleviate tensions and lead to a regional security architecture between the major power players. While the U.S. "Twin Pillar" policy—heavily relying on security cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran to protect U.S. interests in the region—worked in the 1970s, the 1979 Revolution transformed Iran's entire governing structure into a hyper conservative anti-American and anti-Israeli apparatus.²⁸⁷ Also, what happens to Israel if the United States, Saudi and Iran reconcile their deep seated differences—at least on the surface? It should also be noted that the Iranian regime and revolutionary ideology do not benefit from rapprochement with the United States and its partners because its campaigns against them are a testament to its domestic population of the legitimacy of its revolutionary ideology, which secures the regime from being overthrown.²⁸⁸ This short-sighted course of action would shatter the

²⁸⁶ Nasr and Fantappie, "How Iran and Saudi Arabia Can Together Bring Peace to the Middle East."

²⁸⁷ David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, eds., *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, Sixth edition (New York, NY: Westview Press, 2018), 238.

²⁸⁸ Wang Xiyue, "Lessons From Three Years in an Iranian Prison," September 3, 2020, *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2020-09-03/lessons-three-years-iranian-prison>; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 240.

developing relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel by leaving Israel as the last scapegoat standing for Iran.

C. MACRO INTERACTION BETWEEN CAUSAL MECHANISMS

This chapter explored the conditions in which the main drivers of Saudi cooperation with Israel—mutual concern over Iran, Saudi’s secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence—could individually promote or inhibit future cooperative initiatives in a highly dynamic political environment. More broadly, the analysis also suggests that as one category of drivers promotes or inhibits cooperation in its own sphere of influence, it also impacts the ability of the other two categories of drivers to promote or inhibit cooperation. This macro dynamic is evident in the following scenarios:

1. An increased Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia can increase U.S. influence as either a security guarantor or moderator between Saudi Arabia and Israel.
2. As MBS’s religious reform initiatives accelerate to promote cooperation with Israel, Iran’s ideological threat increases to both Saudi and Israel.
3. Decreased U.S. influence in the Middle East increases Saudi and Israel’s perception of the Iranian threat in the absence of the United States as a security guarantor.
4. U.S. influence decreases as Saudi and Israel secure alternate security arrangements to address an increased Iranian threat in the absence of the United States as a security guarantor.

The main drivers of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel are not comparable in terms of strength or in the direction in which they promote or inhibit cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. For example, as Saudi accelerates its reform initiatives, U.S. influence on the relationship between Saudi and Israel does not necessarily change. However, the dynamics of how these drivers singularly impact the problem set, overlaid with this macro perspective of the interaction between the main drivers delivers a holistic and extraordinarily complicated examination of why Saudi and Israel move towards and against cooperating with one another in pursuit of their respective ambitions across the Middle East.

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V. CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated why Saudi Arabia has increased its diplomatic negotiations and cooperation with Israel during the 21st century, after decades of animosity between the two countries. Initial research on the topic also triggered the smaller, but related question as to whether or not this increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel signaled a viable pathway to official normalization of relations in light of the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan establishing full normalization with Israel in 2020. These normalization agreements focused international attention on the historic tension associated with Arab states establishing relations with Israel, and whether Saudi would follow suit. Since Israel's inception in 1948, the legitimacy of its existence has been contested by Saudi Arabia. The contention emerges from Israel's policies toward Palestinians and occupation of Palestinian territory, including the holy city of Jerusalem. After decades of exchanging harsh rhetoric and Israel's human rights record against Palestinians, it appeared strange that Saudi Arabia had increased cooperation with a country that many of its people and allies view as an enemy of Islam and the Arab people.

This disconnect allowed for an investigation of the most salient variables that have encouraged Saudi Arabia to potentially jeopardize its own legitimacy by cooperating with Israel over the last two decades—mutual concern with Iran, Saudi reform initiatives under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and U.S. influence (or lack thereof). This thesis concludes that in the present configuration—and in line with scholars on the subject—that the drivers of Saudi's cooperation initiatives with Israel collectively have not stimulated a viable path to normalization of relations that circumvents the barrier of Palestinian self-determination. In April 2021, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud stated that “it would be extremely helpful economically, socially, and from a security perspective” to normalize Israel's status in the region, and that “normalizing ties with Israel has long been part of Saudi Arabia's vision” in exchange for Israel delivering a sovereign

state to the Palestinians.²⁸⁹ This thesis also concludes that the drivers to cooperation work in tandem to promote or inhibit cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and changes to one driver impact the salience of the other drivers.

While there has been significant research into Saudi and Israel's evolving relationship over time, scholars have largely isolated one or two of the factors that promote or inhibit cooperation—mutual concern with Iran, Saudi reform initiatives under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and U.S. influence (or lack thereof)—without analyzing how the factors work in tandem to promote or inhibit cooperation. This thesis rigorously examined how those factors have interacted during the 21st century for a more holistic understanding of what Saudi Arabia and Israel's relationship hinges on now and in the future. This thesis did not argue whether or not Saudi and Israel will normalize relations in the future, but instead looked at the conditions that could move the two countries towards or against additional cooperative initiatives that could pave a viable pathway towards full normalization of relations in the future.

The first chapter encompassed an introduction of the problem set, as well as a literature review on the available scholarship to date that covers factors that promote or inhibit cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Chapter I concluded that most scholars agree that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the largest impediment to full normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and that a mutual security concern with Iran is the primary driver of cooperation between the two states. Chapter I also concluded a subtle divergence in the literature on the feasibility of normalization without Palestinian self-determination—split between most scholars that reject the notion that Saudi Arabia would ever pursue normalization before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is settled, and a smaller group of scholars that acknowledge Saudi's seemingly intractable demands for Palestinian self-determination, but offer evidence of subtle changes within Saudi leadership and domestic public opinion that could at the very least change the parameters of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Chapter II discussed the historical factors impeding

²⁸⁹ AlJazeera Staff, "Saudi FM: Deal with Israel Will Be 'Extremely Helpful' for Region," Aljazeera, April 2, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/2/saudi-fm-says-normalisation-with-israel-extremely-helpful>.

Saudi and Israeli normalization, to include Palestinian self-determination. Chapter III explored how salient Saudi and Israel's mutual concern over Iran, Saudi's secular reform initiatives, and U.S. influence has been on promoting cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel over the last two decades, short of normalization. Chapter IV then analyzed hypothetical conditions that would further or inhibit cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, based on Saudi leadership statements and ongoing changes to the political environment.

The research in this thesis supports the original argument by scholars that mutual concern with Iran, Saudi's contemporary reform initiatives, and U.S. influence have in fact promoted cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel under the right circumstances, but to date have not collectively stimulated a viable path to normalization of relations that circumvents the barrier of Palestinian self-determination. Additionally, Saudi's barriers to normalization with Israel are predominantly the result of an enduring Saudi Arab tradition of cultural bigotry against the Jewish people, and not born out of religion. Saudi's increased diplomacy and cooperation with Israel in the 21st century has therefore been a balancing act for Saudi Arabia to further its security interests while maintaining its religious and political legitimacy within Saudi Arabia and the wider Muslim world. As evidence against the drivers to cooperation between Saudi and Israel, the research illuminated an inconsistency in the salience of the three drivers over time, as well as significant gaps in the analysis based on unknown and/or impending political changes in the Middle East. U.S. retrenchment from the region, a new U.S. administration, a renegotiation of the Iranian nuclear deal, and recent reconciliatory dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran change the conditions under which the three drivers towards Saudi and Israel's cooperation are effective.

The mutual concern of Iran is the most palpable and consistent driver towards Saudi and Israel's cooperation. Saudi Arabia has established a pragmatic and limited strategic relationship with Israel to counter and deter Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions that Iran realizes through its exportation of revolutionary Islam, mobilization of client militias, and nuclear program. These growing threats from Iran have encouraged the Saudi Kingdom to exchange historical animosity towards the Jewish state for strategic cooperation in the form

of limited military and intelligence cooperation against Iran. Saudi's reform initiatives under MBS are less palpable than the Iranian threat. Nonetheless, the salience of MBS's reform initiatives have driven Saudi's desire to cooperate with Israel, based on MBS's lack of sympathy for the Palestinians, as well as his commitment to eradicate extremist ideology from the region and increase religious tolerance within the Kingdom.²⁹⁰ Theoretically, Saudi's reform initiatives under MBS hold immense potential to forge enduring ties with Israel under a neoliberal institutionalist framework in the diplomatic, information, military, and economic sectors. Lastly, the United States provided the initial impetus for Saudi and Israel to view the pragmatic benefits of coordinating their activities in the region, and nurtured diplomatic ties between the two states over the last several decades.²⁹¹ Saudi Arabia and Israel base their regional security strategies on the U.S. willingness and ability to project strategic leadership across the region, and more importantly when the United States is unwilling or unable to do so.²⁹²

Contrary to their historical animosity, Saudi and Iran engaged in secret diplomatic talks in April 2021, corresponding with MBS's diplomatic campaign to repair relationships with Saudi's rivals in the Middle East.²⁹³ Saudi Arabia has signaled a recent willingness to negotiate with Iran to de-escalate tensions across the region due to inconsistent U.S. security guarantees, ongoing U.S. nuclear negotiations with Iran, as well as U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East.²⁹⁴ This unfolding political development has the potential to render the mutual concern with Iran—the strongest driver towards Saudi and Israel's cooperative initiatives—inert. Additionally, MBS's succession to the Saudi kingship is not guaranteed. While MBS has enacted rapid and radical restructuring of the Saudi governance system that increases the monarchy's political and religious power, MBS

²⁹⁰ Farouk and Brown. "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention;" Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 224.

²⁹¹ Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," 445-446.

²⁹² Jones and Guzansky, "Israel's Relations with the Gulf States," 399; Rynhold and Yaari, "The Quiet Revolution in Saudi-Israeli Relations," 2.

²⁹³ Bostock, "Saudi Arabia Is Trying to Patch Things up with Bitter Rivals Iran and Turkey, Showing MBS Knows the U.S. Isn't Batting for Him Anymore."

²⁹⁴ Harb, "Saudi Arabia-Iran Rapprochement: What Is Driving Push for Diplomacy?"

will still have to navigate through considerations of family in-fighting and power moves, domestic opinion, and most importantly the backing of the religious establishment, before ascending the throne.²⁹⁵ While MBS has initiated significant reforms as Crown Prince, he is still beholden to the Wahhabi religious establishment that undergirds his legitimacy now and in the future as king. This dynamic creates impediments to quickly moving Saudi domestic support towards increased cooperation with Israel, and in the near term, the monarchy is unlikely to break its pact with its Wahhabi base because Wahhabism is indispensable to the monarchy's long-term political stability.²⁹⁶ If MBS takes a misstep that empowers the royal family to sideline him with the support of the religious base, MBS's progressive reform initiatives that privilege Israel likely will not be upheld by a more traditional replacement king.

Lastly, U.S. influence in the Middle East is waning. Saudi Arabia and the United States have enjoyed a mutually beneficial—and mostly transactional—relationship based on the United States protecting Saudi Arabia from external attacks, weapons sales, and U.S. access to basing and oil. However, this relationship has ebbed and flowed over the course of the last two decades, with a less favorable relationship under the Obama administration, a reinvigorated sense of partnership under the Trump administration, and now a frigid, yet largely unknown arrangement with the Biden administration. Whether the U.S. continues to retrench itself from the region, or Saudi simply decides that it cannot depend on the United States to guarantee its security—even in the short term until the next administration takes over—U.S. influence matters less in mediating a relationship with Israel. In light of the array of unknown factors that impact the drivers to Saudi and Israel's cooperation, the feasibility of Saudi reconciling with Iran, what Saudi reform initiatives would look like if MBS does not succeed his father as king, and changes in Saudi's political and military actions without the United States as a security guarantor are areas of academia that would benefit from additional scholarship. While the barrier of Palestinian self-

²⁹⁵ Farouk and Brown. "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention."

²⁹⁶ Ayoob and Kosebalaban, *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State*, 64; Yury Barmin, "Can Mohammed Bin Salman Break the Saudi-Wahhabi Pact?"

determination remains seemingly impenetrable, the two nations will continue to cooperate against mutually perceived threats, and towards mutually beneficial opportunities short of normalization as long as the strategic context of their relationship endures. However, that strategic context is challenged by recent changes in the political environment.

A. IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The Middle East endures in its pivotal role in United States foreign policy, and Saudi Arabia and Israel remain the most capable and willing partners in the region to further U.S. national interests. The United States may decrease its military footprint and influence in the Middle East, but the threats to U.S. national security emanating from malign actors in the Middle East do not disappear simply because we have pivoted to a more pressing problem set, such as great power competition. U.S. actions and inactions have consequences. U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East could create a power vacuum and instigate shifting balances of power in the absence of a viable alternate framework to uphold favorable dynamics in the region to the United States. Saudi and Israel are drawn closer together by a mutually perceived threat of Iran, Saudi reform initiatives, and U.S. influence as a moderator between the two countries. If the United States removes itself as a driver of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the two countries will pursue avenues that guarantee their own security interests, and those avenues may not be together and may not be in line with U.S. values. It would be a good news story for Saudi Arabia and Israel to continue their trajectory of cooperation without U.S. influence as a driver, but removing U.S. influence impacts the salience of the other two drivers as well. The United States cannot abandon its traditional partners in the Middle East while simultaneously dictating the manner in which those partners scramble to guarantee their security in the absence of the United States as their traditional security guarantor. If cooperation towards normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel remains compatible with furthering U.S. policy in the Middle East, the United States should focus on reinvigorating both its bilateral and multilateral relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel to promote common objectives, decrease confusion on the U.S. role in the region, and circumvent unintended consequences of retrenching without a solid foreign policy plan that is vetted by our network of allies and partners.

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