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SAUDI INITIATIVES REGARDING THE WAR IN GAZA AND LEBANON: PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY

WATHEQ AL SADOON



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Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Address : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA
Phone : +90 850 888 15 20
Email : info@orsam.org.tr
Photos : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)

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About the Author

■ **Watheq Al Sadoon**

Watheq Al-Sadoon has been the Senior Expert on Gulf Studies at the ORSAM Center since August 2024. He was Director of Arabic Studies at ORSAM from 2020 to 2024. He worked as an Expert on Iraqi Studies at ORSAM from 2018 to 2020 and was a Visiting Researcher at ORSAM from 2015 to 2018. He was a faculty member at the University of Mosul in Iraq from 2008 to 2018 and a Senior Researcher at the Center for Regional Studies at the University of Mosul during the same period. He taught "History of International Relations" to students of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Mosul for several years. He holds a Ph.D. in the History of International Relations and a Master's degree in Contemporary Military History. His research interests focus on Middle Eastern affairs, the security dimension in international relations, and military and security strategies. He authored the book "Factors of Power and Weakness in Contemporary Iraqi-Turkish Relations" (2017) and the book "The Security Dimension in Contemporary Iraqi-Turkish Relations" (2014). He contributed to the co-authorship of five books with other researchers: "Iraq and the Arab Gulf States" (2013), "Studies in the Contemporary History of the Caucasus" (2011), "Decision-Making in the Arab Gulf States" (2010), "Strategic Report of the Center for Regional Studies" (2010), and "Strategic Report of the Center for Regional Studies" (2012). He has 30 research papers published in Iraqi, Arab, and Turkish scientific journals, and dozens of articles, situation assessments, and policy briefs. He has delivered lectures at numerous scientific conferences, seminars, workshops, and training courses in Iraq, Arab countries, and Turkey. In 2015, he received a two-year research fellowship from the Institute of International Education in New York. He is a recognized political analyst on TRT Arabic, Anadolu Agency, and several other Arab and Iraqi channels.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two months, we have witnessed an acceleration in diplomatic initiatives launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to address the war in Gaza and Lebanon.

On September 27, 2024, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud announced the establishment of an "international coalition" to support creating a Palestinian state and implement the two-state solution. The announcement was made in New York from within the halls of the United Nations. On October 30, 2024, Riyadh hosted the coalition's first meeting, with representatives from 90 countries in attendance¹. Then, on November 11, 2024, Saudi Arabia organized an Arab-Islamic summit to discuss the situa-

tion in Gaza and Lebanon. Leaders from every Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation member states were invited to this summit. The final statement of the Riyadh Summit 2024 took a more forceful and condemnatory stance, targeting Israel's actions more prominently than Riyadh's extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit in November 2023.. As a key mediator and facilitator, Türkiye participated in these summits, with President Erdoğan playing a pivotal role in emphasizing the need to hold Israel accountable.

Two U.S.-backed negotiation tracks are now in progress but have not yet produced a major breakthrough to end the conflict, which coincides with Saudi Arabia's current diplomatic efforts regarding the fighting in

¹ Ibrahim Khazen, "Meeting of the -Two-State Solution Alliance- in Riyadh and Ibn Farhan considers it a step to end the Palestinian crisis", *Anadolu Agency*, 31 October 2024.

Gaza and Lebanon. These tracks are the Qatari-Egyptian mediation between Hamas and Israel, and the mediation led by the U.S. Presidential Envoy Amos Hochstein between Lebanon and Israel. Saudi Arabia's recent diplomatic initiatives regarding the war in Gaza and Lebanon are driven by shared motives common to all countries in the region. These include the necessity of stopping the Israeli aggression on Gaza and Lebanon, which has caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties, accompanied by significant destruction of infrastructure. The final statement of the recent Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh described the events in Gaza and Lebanon as a war of extermination. In addition, this Saudi diplomatic activity seeks to prevent the war in Gaza and Lebanon from turning into a comprehensive regional war and, at the same time, highlights the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

Certainly, Saudi Arabia's motives for its current diplomatic initiatives are not limited solely to the Palestinian cause, the situation in Lebanon, or the dynamics of conflict and peace with Israel. Rather, they extend to geo-strategic considerations related to Saudi Arabia's present and future position and roles on the regional and international stage. These efforts also aim to balance its stance on the war in Gaza and Lebanon with those of other regional and global actors.

The ongoing conflict in the region is expected to bring significant changes to the geopolitics of the Middle East, especially with Donald Trump returning to the White House. Those who fail to secure an influential role in the post-war landscape will likely struggle to establish a meaningful position in the future policies of the region.

GEOSTRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS



Iranian President Pezesghian meets with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan in Qatar in October 2024.

Geostrategy is the geographic direction of a state's foreign policy. More precisely, geostrategy describes where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military power and directing diplomatic activity. The underlying assumption is that states have limited resources and are unable, even if they are willing, to conduct a comprehensive foreign policy. Instead, they must focus politically and militarily on specific areas of the world. Geostrategy describes this foreign-policy thrust of a state and does not deal with motivations or decision-making processes. Therefore, geographic or geopolitical factors do not necessarily motivate a state's geostrategy².

Weeks before the events of October 7, 2023, statements from US and Israeli officials, as well as media reports, suggested that there was a diplomatic movement under US sponsorship aimed at normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The reports

indicated that Saudi Arabia was approaching this issue positively and had requested US assistance in taking tangible steps toward resolving the Palestinian issue and improving the lives of Palestinians to encourage Saudi Arabia to move forward with normalisation efforts with Israel³. When the war on Gaza broke out, and the world witnessed the extent of the brutality Israel was inflicting on the Palestinians, Saudi Arabia decided to suspend the issue of normalisation with Israel, reconsidering its position and making a diplomatic turn towards the Palestinian issue. On November 11, 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted The first extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit on the war in Gaza, which decided to establish a joint ministerial contact group on the Palestinian issue between the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League. This group includes the foreign ministers of eight countries: Türkiye, Palestine, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi

² Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great powers and geopolitical change*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (USA, 2006), p. 22.

³ Dharar Ameer, "What is Saudi Arabia's interest in normalizing relations with Israel?", *BBC News Arabic*, 21 September 2023.

Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria, as well as the secretaries-general of the OIC and the Arab League.

Following the events of October 7, Saudi Arabia adopted an official stance on the Palestinian cause in addition to continuing to provide humanitarian help to the Gaza population, who are subject to Israeli violence. The stance asserts that it is time to find a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue, not only to stop the ongoing war that erupted on October 7, 2023, and prevent its expansion in the region, but also to end the suffering of the Palestinian people that has lasted for more than seven decades. The meeting underlined that the Palestinians must be allowed to live in freedom and dignity in their independent state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, based on the 1967 borders. The future of the conflict and the future relationship with Israel must be discussed in light of these developments.

Since the events of October 7 and the outbreak of the war in Gaza, which later expanded to Lebanon, Israel has been attempting to obscure the facts of the Palestinian cause. It has sought to reduce the security and political dimensions of this conflict, which has lasted for over seven decades, to portray it as a confrontation between Iran and its allies on one side and Israel and its allies on the other. The US political and media narrative supporting Israel has largely aligned with this new storyline. Even media outlets supportive of Iran and its allies have adopted a narrative suggesting that the actions, reactions, and positions of Iran and its allies have become the most crucial factors in determining the fate of both the Palestinian and Lebanese causes.

FORMATION OF A NEW AXIS

There has been a kind of "unfair" marginalization of the importance of the actions and

positions of other Arab and Islamic countries regarding the Palestinian and Lebanese causes. There is only interest in the positions and policies of the US, Israel, and Iran towards these issues.

Recently, when discussing the future roles of countries in the region (excluding Iran) in the post-Gaza war period, international media only mention the importance of the contributions of other non-regional countries to the reconstruction and stabilization of the areas devastated by the war in Gaza and Lebanon. So far, the US and Israel, as well as some global parties interested in this, are not discussing the need for a political or security role for other Islamic or Arab countries in the pathways of the war in Gaza and Lebanon, or in the next day of this war.

Although the recent Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh condemned Israel's violation of Iran's sovereignty, Saudi Arabia sensed the danger of linking the fate of the Palestinian cause and the developments in Lebanon to the outcomes of the Iranian-Israeli/US confrontation. Many other Arab and Islamic countries likely share Saudi Arabia's perspective.

This new equation being proposed for the conflict risks jeopardizing and diminishing the Palestinian cause, especially if the Israel-US axis manages to weaken Iran politically and militarily and its allies' axis, or if compromises and trade-offs are made between the two sides. Moreover, this new equation would deprive other Arab and Islamic countries of any significant role or influence in the trajectories of the Palestinian and Lebanese causes. Suppose the Palestinian and Lebanese issues turn into a mere conflict between Iran on one side and the US and Israel on the other. In that case, other Islamic and Arab countries will lose their influence or significance in the course of this conflict. The importance will be limited to

these three parties: the US, Israel, and Iran. As a result, these countries would lose their regional and international standing, as the Palestinian cause remains the central issue for stability and peace in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia is a pivotal country, well-positioned to contribute to and influence all regional crises, and cannot simply be ignored or excluded from the Palestinian issue. Even in the case of Lebanon, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabia played a key role as a mediator in ending the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) through the Taif Agreement, signed in Saudi Arabia on September 30, 1989⁴. Regarding the situation in Lebanon, the final statement of the Riyadh summit strongly condemned the Israeli aggression against Lebanon and the violation of its sovereignty. It also called for an immediate ceasefire and the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was issued to halt the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese war⁵.

It may be difficult for Saudi Arabia this time to play a significant role in the path toward achieving peace in Lebanon, as it did during the previous civil war in the country. This is due to its diminished ability to com-

municate with and influence key actors in Lebanon, as Iran has managed to establish absolute dominance over the decisions of Hezbollah and its allies among other Lebanese parties. However, Saudi Arabia will not abandon its efforts to influence the trajectory of the Palestinian cause in the aftermath of this war for the people of Lebanon and the stability of the Middle East as well.

Saudi Arabia seeks to secure a seat at the negotiating table in the post-war period, not merely to provide financial support for rebuilding what has been destroyed by the war. Saudi Arabia started to seek a path to regain its influence and action on the Palestinian cause, engaging with the events in Gaza and Lebanon and moving away from the atmosphere of US mediation to normalize its relations with Israel, which was not timed well. Saudi diplomacy found its direction in the initiative to form a Two-State Solution Alliance.

This initiative is a revival of an older Saudi proposal launched by the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud at the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, later known as the "Arab Peace Initiative," which has remained suspended for decades. At the time, the initiative stipulated the

Saudi Arabia is a pivotal country, well-positioned to contribute to and influence all regional crises, and cannot simply be ignored or excluded from the Palestinian issue.

4 Mansour bin Abdullah Al Mansour, "How did Saudi Arabia qualify to end the Lebanese war with the Taif Agreement?", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 22 November 2001.

5 "After Mikati rejects Iranian guardianship: What do we know about UN Security Council Resolution 1701?", *BBC News Arabic*, 18 October 2024.

following: Israel must withdraw from all Arab territories (Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese) it occupied after the 1967 war; the establishment of a Palestinian state recognized internationally; the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes; in exchange for Arab states recognizing the state of Israel and normalizing relations with it⁶.

The obstacles facing the current negotiation paths in the wars in Gaza and Lebanon have not diminished Saudi Arabia's momentum toward forming a multilateral international-regional diplomatic bloc. This bloc adopts a vision for the Palestinian cause and the nature of the conflict with Israel that differs from the perspective of Iran and its allies, as well as from the perspective of Israel and its supporters.

The outcomes of the recent Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh highlighted the founda-

tions of the vision for the third axis that Saudi Arabia seeks to form. The key points include supporting the efforts of Egypt, Qatar, and the US to achieve an immediate and lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, the release of hostages (held by Hamas) and prisoners (Palestinians in Israeli prisons), and holding Israel accountable for the failure of these efforts due to the Israeli government's retreat from agreements reached by negotiators; achieving peace based on the two-state solution; and striving to end the Israeli occupation of Arab territories based on international law, UN resolutions, the frameworks of the peace process, and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. At this point, to remember the past, following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the UN General Assembly issued Resolution 242, which calls for Israel to withdraw from the territories it occupied during that war to enable Palestinians to establish their state.

6 Ayman AL-Ghabawi, "The Arab Peace Initiative... A Saudi Plan That Was and Still Is the Solution," *Independent Arabic*, 30 March 2024.



Khalil al-Hayya, deputy head of Hamas's political bureau, speaks at a press conference in Gaza in April 2017.

CHALLENGES

There are obstacles facing Saudi Arabia's diplomatic initiatives to activate the vision of the two-state solution, requiring significant diplomatic efforts from Saudi Arabia to overcome them. The two-state solution vision is based on achieving peace by establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, along the 1967 borders, as a condition for normalizing relations with Israel.

Despite the official approval of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian factions within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for the vision of the two-state solution in all its aspects, Hamas and the Palestinian factions allied with it, as well as some factions not closely aligned with Hamas, reject this vision. According to the official statements of the Palestinian parties opposing the two-state solution, they refuse to recognize Israel as a fully legitimate state. However, at the same time, they agree to the establishment

of an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, but only as an interim stage until the full liberation of Palestinian territories from Israeli occupation⁷. Over time, it is understandable that different Palestinian factions have held varying positions on the two-state solution, both historically and presently. This is particularly expected in a region as politically and territorially fragmented as Palestine. The diversity in these positions reflects the complex socio-political landscape and differing priorities among Palestinian groups.

After the brutal assault on Gaza, Israel may manage to undermine the military capabilities of Hamas and other Palestinian factions it accuses of resisting the two-state solution. However, eroding the deep-rooted political and ideological influence of these factions, born from decades of resistance against what many see as Israel's oppressive and genocidal policies, remains far more challenging. It is important to note that Israel itself does not

7 "Hamas accepts the 1967 borders without giving up all of Palestine," *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2017.

genuinely support a two-state solution, yet it shifts the blame for the continued deadlock onto Palestinian actors, portraying them as the main obstacles to peace.

Saudi Arabia currently maintains positive relations with the Palestinian Authority but has officially halted communication with Hamas and other Palestinian groups that have opposed the two-state solution for years. This development suggests a potential shift in discourse that warrants careful observation. As political wisdom often suggests, meaningful dialogue is most essential when engaging with those who hold differing views, rather than relying solely on alignment with allies.

On the other hand, many political parties, figures, and far-right groups within Israel reject the vision of the two-state solution. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government belong to this camp. They oppose any attempt to recognize Palestinian rights within what they refer to as the "Promised Land." At the regional level, many countries in the region do not recognize Israel as a state, such as Iran. Additionally, some countries criminalize normalisation with Israel, such as Iraq⁸, and others that oppose normalisation, like Algeria,

Tunisia, and Libya⁹. There are also countries, such as Türkiye, which had relations with Israel but severed them in protest against Israeli crimes in Gaza and in support of Palestinian rights¹⁰. Furthermore, some countries are in active armed conflict with Israel, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

In addition to the challenge of promoting the two-state solution in the region, Saudi Arabia faces another challenge: the presence of some Arab countries, including Gulf states, that remain uneasy about any leadership role Saudi Arabia assumes in regional crises and affairs. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) may have faced significant challenges in demonstrating a unified position on regional challenges, but in matters that concern all Arabs and Muslims, such as the Palestinian issue, there has been a visible, albeit limited, show of harmony. However, this level of backing has not been sufficient to fully resolve the internal issues within the GCC or to eliminate underlying rivalries among its members. The fractures and competition within the council persist, indicating that while moments of collective concern do arise, they are not enough to overcome long-standing tensions.

8 "Iraq criminalizes normalization with Israel. What are the implications and consequences?", *Al Arabiya TV*, 26 May 2022.

9 Sarah Yerkes, "North Africa Demurs on Normalization With Israel", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 15 September 2023.

10 Muhammet Torunlu, " Erdogan: We cut trade and relations with Israel and stand with Palestine", *Anadolu Agency*, 13 November 2024.



Donald Trump delivers his victory speech in the US presidential election, to his supporters in Florida, on November 6, 2024.

TRUMP'S RETURN

Although Saudi diplomatic initiatives began before the 2024 US presidential elections, the victory of former President Donald Trump in these elections is a significant influencing factor on the trajectory of these initiatives. Trump's return to the White House can be seen as both a motive and a challenge for Saudi initiatives at the same time.

In his first televised speech after his victory, Trump promised to work on ending the war in the Middle East¹¹. This presents an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to present its initiatives to Trump as a ready-made project for establishing "just" peace in the Middle East, supported by 90 countries involved in the two-state solution alliance and over 50 countries that attended the recent Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh.

If Trump values Saudi Arabia's initiatives within this framework, there is a reasonable possibility that he may align with them, especially considering the historically good re-

lations between Trump and Saudi leadership. This alignment could be mutually beneficial, as the Saudi plan may have been crafted to appeal to such dynamics. A collaboration of this nature could present a win-win scenario for both countries, strengthening Saudi Arabia's regional and international influence while aligning with U.S. interests in the Middle East. Of course, in such a scenario, both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia would likely involve other key actors who have invested significant efforts in addressing this issue, such as Türkiye, Egypt, and Qatar, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive path toward resolution.

But Trump's policies during his first term (2017–2021), along with the figures likely to take important positions in his new administration—who are known for being staunch supporters of Israel—make it difficult to be optimistic that Trump will accept Saudi initiatives as they are, without making adjustments to their content in favor of Israel.

11 "US President-elect Trump pledges to end wars in the Middle East", *Qatar News Agency*, 15 November 2024.

During his first term, Trump took steps that no previous US president had taken, such as moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognizing Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. Trump also pushed for normalisation agreements between Israel on one side and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco on the other, marking the first such agreements since the 1990s. While Saudi Arabia did not join these agreements, its relationship with Trump's administration was close. After the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Riyadh suspended a security and economic agreement with Washington that would have paved the way for normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi Arabia emphasized that it would not recognize Israel without the establishment of a Palestinian state¹².

There is still hope that Trump's new Middle East policy would be more reasonable and

mature than those of his first term. If Trump wishes to maintain US interests in the Middle East, he must take into account the interests of the countries in the region, especially those that are supposed US partners and allies, such as Saudi Arabia, and not just the interests of Israel.

Furthermore, the content of Saudi initiatives and the level of international support for them will provide a strong foundation for adopting "defensive" diplomatic positions in defense of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and the rights of all regional countries that have issues with Israel. This would be especially important if Trump decides to impose an unfair peace plan on the region that heavily favors Israel, similar to the "Deal of the Century" promoted by Trump during his first term.

12 "Riyadh Summit: Arab-Islamic consensus on establishing a Palestinian state and unifying efforts against Israeli escalation in Lebanon and Gaza," *France 24*, 12 November 2024.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia has recently undertaken several diplomatic initiatives regarding the armed conflict that erupted in the region following October 7, 2023. Among the most significant initiatives are the formation of an alliance to implement the two-state solution in September 2024 and the organization of the Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh on the war in Gaza and Lebanon in November 2024. These Saudi initiatives can be evaluated from several dimensions. From a humanitarian perspective, these initiatives represent a necessary response from a country of Saudi Arabia's stature in the Islamic and Arab worlds to the war crimes committed by Israel against the Palestinians and the immense humanitarian suffering endured by the Palestinian people as a result of this conflict. From a regional security perspective, these initiatives reflect the demands of most countries in the region for the necessity of halting this war and preventing its escalation into a full-scale regional conflict. In addition to the anticipated humanitarian cost of battles of this size, such a conflict would



Spanish FM Albares receives Foreign Ministers of the Arab-Islamic Ministerial Committee on Gaza, which was formed at the extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh in November 2023. In Madrid on May 29, 2024.

jeopardise the development, stability, and security of every country in the region.

From a geostrategic perspective, recent Saudi diplomatic initiatives can be considered a proactive diplomatic step by Saudi Arabia aimed at achieving the following objectives:

1. Decoupling the Palestinian issue from the outcomes of the Iranian-Israeli/US conflict to ensure that this issue retains its independence and central importance in the Arab world.
2. Developing a fair vision for peace in the region—a vision produced by the countries of the region rather than imposed upon them—. This vision is based on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and the interests of the regional countries, rather than solely serving Israel's interests.
3. Clarifying Saudi Arabia's stance on normalisation with Israel, affirming that

there will be no normalisation without the establishment of a Palestinian state.

4. Positioning Saudi Arabia to play a key role in the security and political arrangements in the region in the aftermath of this war.
5. Despite the Saudi initiatives beginning prior to the US elections, the Riyadh Summit was held after Trump's victory. His return to the White House add-

ed two additional geostrategic goals to these initiatives: Saudi Arabia has generally aimed to position itself as a credible partner to the United States in advancing peace in the Middle East, offering a ready-made project based on the two-state solution while simultaneously seeking to preempt any potential attempts by Trump to impose a one-sided peace plan heavily favoring Israel, akin to the "Deal of the Century" proposed during his first term.

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