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**Strategic Linkages: Explaining the Tacit Security Regime in Relations
between Israel and Saudi Arabia**

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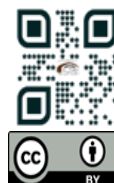
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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel through the conceptual framework of a tacit security regime. Methodologically, the study employs trend analysis as its primary research method within a qualitative research design and relies on documentary and library based sources—including official statements, declassified documents, memoirs, and secondary literature—for data collection. Through this approach, the study investigates the historical evolution, behavioral patterns, and key drivers that have shaped interactions between the two states. The findings suggest that a shared perception of threats—particularly those posed by Iran, resistance movements, and the rise of Sunni political Islam—has gradually facilitated a cautious rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. This convergence has been reflected in intelligence cooperation, covert diplomatic coordination, common positions on regional issues such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and discreet economic and technological collaboration. Nevertheless, domestic constraints (including public sensitivities in Saudi Arabia and the growing influence of far right groups in Israel), external obstacles (most notably the Palestinian issue), political frictions, and persistent mutual distrust have prevented the full normalization of bilateral relations. The article argues that, within a tacit security regime, convergence begins with security concerns and only subsequently expands into other issue areas—in contrast to liberal functionalist perspectives that emphasize functional cooperation as the starting point of integration. Accordingly, relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have evolved not through formal agreements but through converging strategic interests and geopolitical imperatives. Owing to enduring domestic and regional constraints, however, this relationship has yet to develop into a fully institutionalized framework. By emphasizing the regional dynamics of the Middle East, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of unconventional cooperation among seemingly adversarial states.

Keywords: Tacit Security Regime, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Abraham Accords, Normalization

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Introduction

The Middle East, one of the world's most dynamic and geopolitically complex regions, has long been characterized by multifaceted interactions, intense rivalries, and unexpected forms of cooperation among regional and international actors. Within this context, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel—two influential regional powers with a long history of apparent hostility rooted in ideological, political, and historical differences—represents one of the most significant yet understudied subjects in the international relations literature. Although traditionally divided by the Palestinian issue and profound cultural and religious differences, the two states have demonstrated increasing signs of cautious and informal rapprochement over the past two decades.

This rapprochement has been driven primarily by shared perceptions of regional threats, particularly Iran's expanding regional influence and the rise of Sunni political Islam. It has manifested itself through covert cooperation in intelligence, diplomacy, and security affairs (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 112). Such cooperation, which operates without formal treaties or public commitments and instead relies on implicit understandings and confidential coordination, can be effectively analyzed through the concept of a tacit security regime. A tacit security regime refers to a pattern of coordinated behavior among states that develops in the absence of formal agreements for the purpose of managing common security threats and protecting shared strategic interests. Based on geopolitical necessity, converging interests, and limited mutual trust, such arrangements are particularly relevant in unstable and competitive regional environments such as the Middle East (Siniver & Lucas, 2019: 510).

Regional developments since the early 2010s—including the Arab uprisings, conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and the negotiations surrounding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—have fundamentally reshaped regional security calculations. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia and Israel, despite lacking formal diplomatic relations, have engaged in various forms of informal cooperation that raise important theoretical and political questions. These interactions have remained constrained by domestic considerations, including Saudi public opinion regarding normalization with Israel and the growing influence of far right political factions in Israel, as well as external factors such as the Palestinian issue and broader regional and international pressures. Nevertheless, they reveal important transformations in the evolving security architecture of the Middle East.

Methodologically, this research adopts two complementary approaches. First, it employs trend analysis to identify patterns of continuity and change over time. Trend analysis enables researchers to examine the evolution of a phenomenon across different historical periods and to identify directional shifts based on empirical evidence (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018, p. 245). This

method is particularly appropriate for examining the gradual and informal rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel because it facilitates a longitudinal analysis of changing threat perceptions, critical regional developments, and evolving patterns of cooperation. Second, the study adopts a qualitative documentary research design. Data were collected through a systematic review of official documents, government statements, reports published by leading think tanks (including RAND, Chatham House, and the International Crisis Group), verified media analyses, and relevant academic books and journal articles. This approach provides historically grounded and reliable evidence while avoiding the practical limitations associated with field research on sensitive diplomatic and security issues (Bowen, 2009, p. 27).

Examining this phenomenon not only enhances our understanding of unconventional forms of cooperation under conditions of international anarchy but also offers valuable insights into the prospects for regional stability and security. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of the tacit security regime and employing trend analysis, this article investigates the mechanisms, driving forces, and constraints that have shaped Saudi Israeli relations. More specifically, the tacit security regime framework demonstrates that relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia—and, more broadly, between Israel and several Gulf Arab states—have not evolved through a linear process or on the basis of shared normative values. Rather, the gradual transition from overt hostility to implicit strategic alignment has been shaped by competing interests, converging security priorities, and continuous domestic and external pressures, producing a distinctive pattern of regional interaction.

In pursuit of common strategic objectives—most notably containing the Islamic Republic of Iran and countering the so called Axis of Resistance—Saudi Arabia and Israel have increasingly expanded their informal cooperation within the framework of a tacit security regime. These shared interests have been reinforced by broader systemic developments, including regional rivalries, opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters—particularly Qatar and Turkey—and changes in U.S. regional strategy. Collectively, these developments have strengthened both countries' shared threat perceptions while creating opportunities for strategic cooperation. Despite these converging interests, persistent political constraints and limited mutual trust have prevented the establishment of fully normalized diplomatic relations. Consequently, informal mechanisms—including back channel diplomacy, intelligence coordination, and confidential high level meetings—have become the principal means of managing bilateral relations. Since the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, these forms of cooperation have gradually expanded beyond the security domain into economic, technological, and political areas.

Despite the growing body of literature on Saudi Israeli relations, one fundamental question remains insufficiently addressed: why has this long standing strategic relationship not resulted in full diplomatic normalization? Most existing studies, drawing primarily on Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, attribute Saudi Israeli convergence to their shared perception of Iran as a common threat. While this perspective explains the drivers of cooperation, it provides only a limited explanation for the continued absence of formal diplomatic relations and the persistence of unofficial cooperation. The concept of a tacit security regime offers a more comprehensive analytical framework for addressing this puzzle. This article argues that the tacit security regime between Saudi Arabia and Israel has emerged as a pragmatic response to common security threats through informal coordination in intelligence, diplomatic, and military affairs. However, the durability, scope, and prospects for formalization remain constrained by domestic factors—including public opinion, ideological considerations, and internal political dynamics—as well as external challenges, particularly the Palestinian issue, international pressures, and the policies of major powers such as the United States. Ultimately, the future trajectory of this relationship will depend both on the persistence of shared strategic threats and on the extent to which these domestic and external constraints can be overcome.

1. Theoretical Framework: The Tacit Security Regime

The concept of the tacit security regime has emerged as an increasingly important analytical framework in the study of international relations and regional security. It provides a useful lens for examining informal and unwritten forms of cooperation among state and non-state actors operating in competitive and conflict-prone environments (Siniver & Lucas, 2019: 511). Unlike formal security regimes, which are established through treaties, official agreements, and institutionalized mechanisms, tacit security regimes are based on covert coordination and informal, non-binding arrangements that develop to manage common threats or advance shared strategic interests.

In examining tacit security regimes, it is important to distinguish them from liberal institutionalist conceptions of international regimes. Liberal institutionalism generally views regimes as cooperative mechanisms among states that reduce the security dilemma through institutionalized rules and generate collective normative benefits. By contrast, tacit security regimes are grounded primarily in hard-power considerations and shared threat perceptions. Their principal objective is the protection of strategic interests rather than the promotion of normative values or institutionalized cooperation. Consistent with Stephen Krasner's theory of international regimes, such arrangements emerge from the dynamics of the classical security dilemma. They typically develop during periods of acute security crises, serving as mechanisms for managing, containing, or mitigating threats

in ways that preserve the existing regional order and ensure the survival of participating regimes (Kostiner, 2005: 353–354).

Although these regimes originate in the logic of the security dilemma, they also demonstrate that states with divergent interests may nevertheless cooperate when their strategic objectives partially converge. As Jones and Guzansky (2023: 21–22) observe, national interests frequently overlap with compatible objectives, creating opportunities for sustained, albeit limited, patterns of international cooperation.

Accordingly, a tacit security regime can be defined as an informal, interest-based arrangement among states that emerges in response to specific security threats. Such regimes are characterized by a low degree of institutionalization but relatively high expectations of practical cooperation among participating actors. Unlike formal security regimes, which are governed by explicit legal commitments and institutional frameworks, tacit security regimes rely on implicit understandings, reciprocal expectations, and mutually interpreted patterns of behavior. They are typically established to address concrete security challenges, including border security, counterterrorism, nuclear proliferation, and broader issues of regional stability.

This framework enables states to cooperate even while maintaining adversarial relationships in other areas. Rather than seeking to establish comprehensive alliances, participating states coordinate their actions to manage specific security concerns. As a result, tacit security regimes facilitate the formation of pragmatic coalitions capable of responding rapidly to evolving security challenges while providing greater strategic flexibility within the international system (Siniver & Lucas, 2019: 518).

Kleiman identifies three fundamental elements that underpin the structure of a tacit security regime:

1. A shared recognition that the regime guides participants toward particular patterns of behavior and coordinated action.
2. The existence of identifiable mechanisms for managing situations that require reliable procedures for interaction and coordination.
3. The implementation of political measures or informal agreements through methods that are mutually acceptable to all participating actors.

Although the preservation of national security constitutes the primary objective of tacit security regimes, it is not their only function. Equally important, participation in such arrangements does not preclude continued competition—or, alternatively, cooperation—in other political, economic, or diplomatic domains (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 26).

Despite their analytical value, tacit security regimes face several inherent limitations. While they provide states with opportunities to address common security concerns through informal collaboration, they also possess structural

weaknesses that may limit their effectiveness and durability. Cooperation within these arrangements is typically issue-specific and focused on immediate security challenges. Consequently, once a shared threat diminishes or disappears, incentives for continued cooperation often weaken unless collaboration expands into other areas, such as economic, technological, or political relations.

Furthermore, because tacit security regimes lack formal institutional structures, participating states have relatively limited incentives to invest in deeper, trust-based relationships beyond immediate security concerns. The absence of institutionalization may therefore impede the development of more durable and comprehensive partnerships. Moreover, the narrow focus on specific security issues can discourage broader strategic dialogue, producing a paradoxical situation in which states cooperate effectively in one domain while continuing to compete—or even confront one another—in others.

Finally, changes in domestic politics or the international environment may alter states' strategic priorities and threat perceptions. When participating states conclude that continued involvement no longer serves their national interests, they may withdraw from the arrangement without significant institutional costs. This inherent flexibility, while one of the principal strengths of tacit security regimes, also constitutes one of their greatest vulnerabilities, as it can undermine their long-term sustainability.

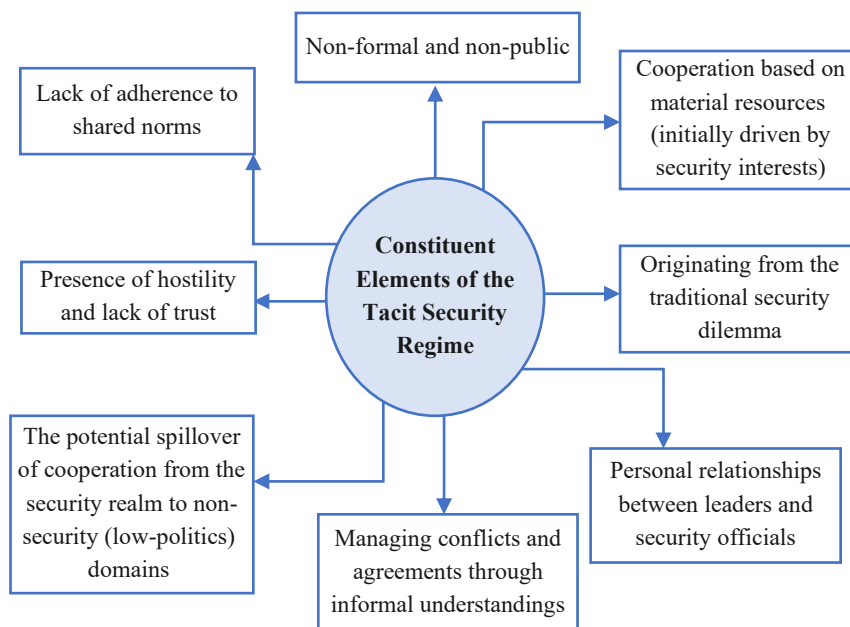


Figure 1- Components of the Tacit Security Regime (Illustrated by the Author)

1-1 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The Theoretical Framework of this study is derived from the fundamental principles and key components of the tacit security regime. The design of the Theoretical Framework for examining the relations between the Israel and Saudi Arabia, based on the tacit security regime concept, involves mapping the informal and often unwritten aspects of security cooperation, shared interests, and mutual strategic concerns between the two actors, while also taking into account regional and international complexities. The components of the current study's conceptual framework are outlined as follows:

a) Shared Strategic Interests: Shared strategic interests, primarily the perception of a common threat, form the foundation of the tacit security regime. In other words, the starting point of a tacit security regime lies in the mutual recognition of threats by two or more actors, who then align themselves and engage collectively through the regime. Beyond shared threat perceptions, a common understanding among actors regarding regional and global issues constitutes another essential component in the realization of a tacit security regime.

b) Mechanisms of Informal Cooperation: Unlike conventional security regimes, the tacit security regime operates covertly and behind the scenes. Due to the inherent limitations faced by actors, cooperation and participation are not publicly declared. Such interactions often begin with intelligence agencies and security services and later extend to back-channel diplomacy and secret meetings for information exchange and security discussions. Thus, one key characteristic of the tacit security regime is clandestine collaboration among actors, despite their active engagement on specific issues. External

c) Systemic Influences: External and systemic influences on actors are also considered within a tacit security regime. Actors are affected by the structure of the international system and regional and global polarizations. These influences can either incentivize deeper relations or act as obstacles to their intensification. External factors include the role of major powers—particularly the United States—as well as regional and global alliances and rivalries, all of which impact the nature of inter-state and inter-actor relations.

d) Constraints and Barriers: A crucial aspect of the tacit security regime involves the limitations and barriers confronting actors. These constraints explain why, despite cooperation and engagement, the actors do not publicly disclose or formalize their interactions. Primarily, these barriers pertain to domestic considerations. Moreover, within the framework of a tacit security regime, identity-based disagreements and divergences are also taken into account. Therefore, alongside collaborative efforts, points of contention are acknowledged and managed.

e) Outcomes and Implications: Overall, the tacit security regime seeks to explain why deepening relations and cooperation on specific issues remain largely opaque and informal. This structure accounts not only for collaborative interactions but also for areas of disagreement, emphasizing that actors consciously manage their relations with awareness of each other's constraints. Operating within a realist perspective, the regime focuses on threat perception, the necessity of balancing, the classical security dilemma, systemic and structural effects, and domestic considerations as highlighted by neoclassical theories. Accordingly, high-level interactions between the two actors are maintained, but they are generally limited to specific dossiers and are neither formalized nor publicly announced. Cooperation typically begins in the security–military domain and gradually spills over into other areas. Nonetheless, actors, cognizant of each other's limitations and constraints, attempt to manage their relations and engage in deep collaboration in areas of convergence, despite divergences in certain issues.

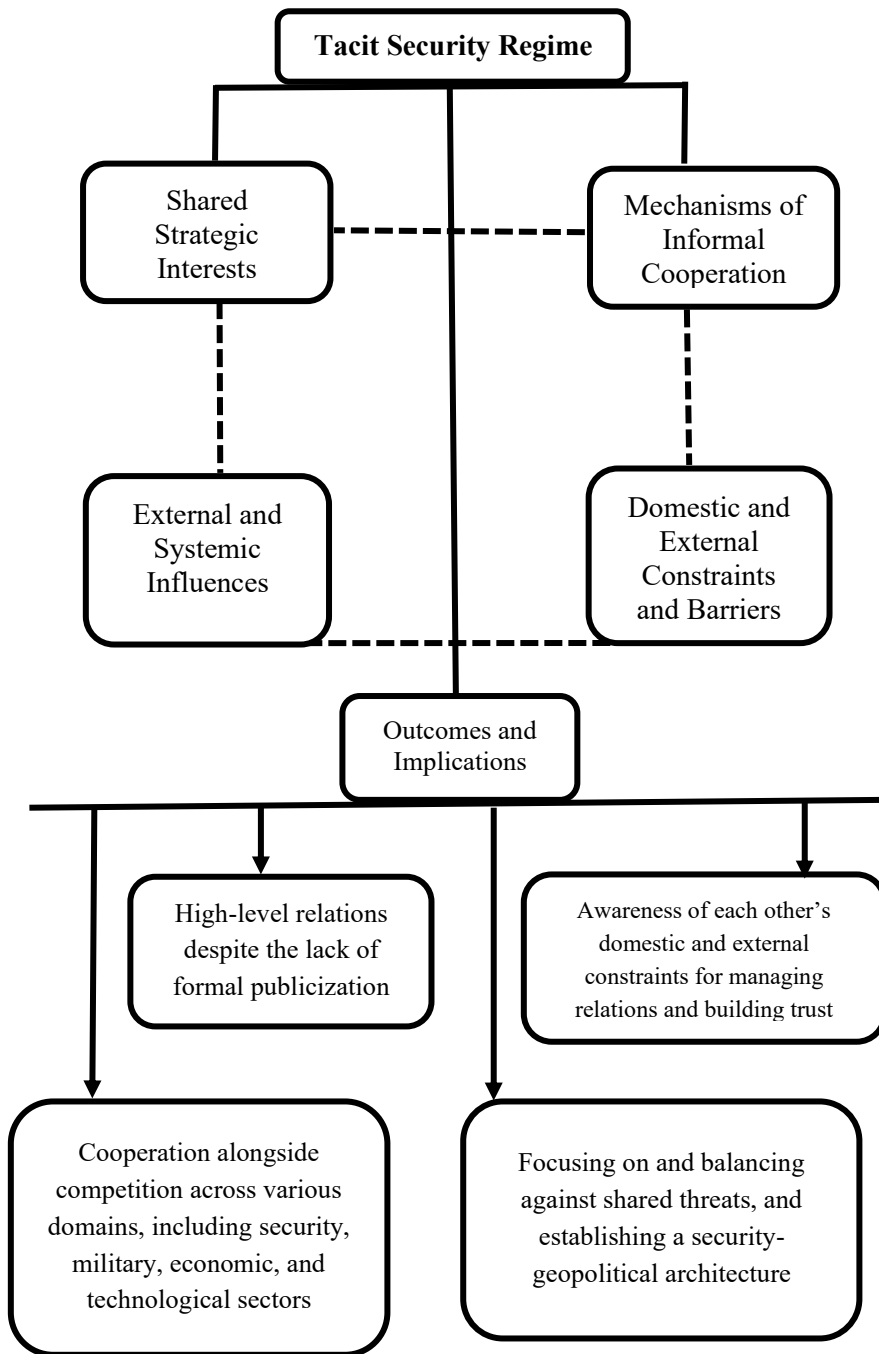


Figure 2 – Theoretical Framework of the Study: Tacit Security Regime (Illustrated by the Author)

2. History of Relations between the Israel and Saudi Arabia

Relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia constitute one of the most complex and sensitive topics in Middle Eastern politics. These two actors have experienced various phases of interaction, from the period prior to the establishment of the State of Israel to the present day. This section examines the historical evolution of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia from 1920 to the present, analyzing them across five distinct chronological periods.



Figure 3 – Historical Phases of Relations between the Israel and Saudi Arabia (1900–2025) (Illustrated by the Author)

2.1. Pre-Establishment of Israel (Era of Neglect and Weakness of Saudi Leaders)

The earliest interactions between Saudi Arabia and Israel date back to the period preceding the establishment of the State of Israel, when Jewish migration to Palestine was increasing. Although these interactions were not publicly acknowledged, cautious contacts existed between certain influential Saudi leaders and Zionist figures who supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This exchange of ideas and exploratory discussions laid the groundwork for future interactions between the two states (Karoui, 2024: 50). However, despite these initial contacts, the Saudi government and other Gulf states had limited engagement with Jewish communities before the twentieth century and were primarily focused on regional power struggles.

Between the pre-establishment period and the founding of Israel in 1948, Saudi Arabia was more concerned with securing domestic legitimacy to

maintain its rule and countering the rising influence of the Hashemites in West Asia than with developments in Palestine. Accordingly, while Saudi Arabia opposed the 1947 UN Partition Plan—which proposed the partition of Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states—the Saudi king strongly resisted any Hashemite efforts to expand their influence across the Arab world. Similarly, Abdulaziz was less concerned about the establishment of a Jewish state than about the possibility of a clandestine Hashemite-Zionist plot to partition Palestine between the Hashemites and the Zionists.

Consequently, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Saudi Arabia played a limited role. Its participation was mainly confined to providing military and political support to other Arab countries. However, owing to military and geographical constraints, its involvement was less significant than that of neighboring states such as Egypt and Jordan.

2.2. Period of Mutual Isolation: From the Establishment of Israel to the Early 1980s

The Arab-Israeli conflicts of the twentieth century further strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. As a prominent Arab and Muslim nation, Saudi Arabia aligned itself with the broader Arab consensus, supported Palestinian efforts to establish an independent state, and condemned Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. From this point onward, the Arab-Israeli conflicts not only shaped regional political dynamics but also influenced public opinion in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, viewing itself as the guardian of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, opposed Israel's actions and sought not to fall behind other Arab countries—including Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—that were vying for leadership in the Arab world. To maintain its position and credibility, Saudi Arabia participated, albeit in a limited capacity, in the Arab-Israeli wars by sending troops to reinforce the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon without engaging directly in combat. Its diplomatic position was also relatively explicit, as exemplified by the Arab League Summit in Khartoum (1967), which rejected any compromise with Israel. Additionally, Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab states, exerted pressure on Israel and its allies by using its oil leverage during the Yom Kippur War (1973) to achieve its primary objective, namely the liberation of the occupied territories. During this period, Saudi Arabia also emerged as the principal financial supporter of the Palestinians and the largest donor to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) during the agency's first three decades of operation, thereby supporting the Palestinian cause (Fakhro, 2024: 19). However, the constraints of the international system—notably the Cold War—and regional tensions, particularly with Nasserism, placed Saudi Arabia in a position where it sought to preserve its credibility as an Arab state, cooperate with the United States, and counter Gamal Abdel Nasser. These factors limited Saudi Arabia's direct

involvement in the Palestinian conflict. Israel's victories in the three Arab-Israeli wars further pushed Saudi leaders toward a more conservative stance, effectively acknowledging Israel as a political reality in the region. According to Ely Podeh, "Since that war (1967), Saudi Arabia has indirectly recognized Israel within the 1967 borders" (Ofer, 2023).

2.3. Period of Covert Contact: From the 1980s to the Arab Spring (2011)

Beginning in the early 1980s, Saudi Arabia gradually adjusted its policies toward Israel in response to the profound impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War on its national security. In addition, developments at the international level and the intensification of the bipolar international system led Saudi Arabia toward closer cooperation with the United States and, consequently, greater alignment with U.S. foreign policy, resulting in increased flexibility toward Israel. The normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel in 1979 further created conditions that facilitated Saudi Arabia's contacts with Israel.

Accordingly, in August 1981, Crown Prince Fahd announced the Eight-Point Peace Initiative. This marked the first time that Saudi Arabia had actively presented a proposal for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The most controversial element of the initiative was Point 7, which stated that "all states in the region must be able to live together in peace," a formulation that implied indirect recognition of Israel (Podeh, 2003: 41). The significance of Fahd's initiative lay in the fact that it represented the first occasion on which the Kingdom publicly, rather than privately, articulated its traditional position (Lamb, 1982).

During this period, Saudi Arabia actively participated in forums and conferences aimed at resolving the Palestinian conflict, culminating in the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by King Abdullah in 2002 and endorsed by the Arab League. Following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of U.S. hegemony, regional dynamics underwent significant transformation. Iran's growing regional influence following the Iraq War and the increasing strength of regional resistance groups brought Saudi Arabia and Israel closer together. In other words, the political and military relations between the two states increasingly revolved around shared concerns regarding Iran and the pursuit of regional stability under the U.S. security umbrella, leading to expanded covert contacts. Israel's promotion of the "Iranophobia" narrative further reinforced regional perceptions of the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. These dynamics intensified after the 2006 Lebanon War, Hamas's electoral victory and subsequent control of Gaza in 2007, and, ultimately, the Arab Spring in 2011 (Fakhro, 2024: 41). Consequently, Saudi Arabia increasingly viewed these developments as evidence of the expanding ideological influence of resistance movements and gradually moved toward closer relations with Israel.

2.4. Period of Emerging Public Relations and the Establishment of the Tacit Security Regime: From the Arab Spring to 2016

From 2010 onward, Saudi Arabia acted more openly in its interactions with Israel. Following the Arab Spring, confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran gradually intensified. Consequently, Saudi-Israeli interactions aimed at containing Iran became increasingly visible through enhanced security cooperation. The Arab Spring and the collapse of Arab governments closely aligned with Saudi Arabia and the West brought profound regional changes, many of which strengthened the influence of the resistance axis and forces aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Coupled with U.S. policies under the Obama administration in West Asia, these developments heightened perceptions of the Iranian threat among Arab states, which were already under pressure from Israel's efforts to contain Iran. Following the Arab Spring, concerns about Iran among regional Arab states—particularly Saudi Arabia—deepened, ultimately leading to the severance of diplomatic relations in 2016. In this regard, Ilham Fakhro observes: "The Arab Spring drew Israel and the three Gulf countries closer together. It also reduced the importance of the Palestinian issue and the apparent urgency of resolving the conflict in the view of Gulf actors" (Fakhro, 2024: 61). During this period, particularly after 2010, Saudi officials engaged in increasingly public exchanges with Israel. For example, Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Saudi ambassador to London and Washington and former head of Saudi intelligence, participated in a roundtable organized by the German Marshall Fund in Brussels in 2014. There, he discussed the Arab Peace Initiative with Amos Yadlin, the former head of Israeli Military Intelligence, in a session broadcast live on social media and the internet (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 110). As Prince Alwaleed bin Talal stated in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, "For the first time, the interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel are nearly aligned" (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 143).

2.5. Period of Consolidation of Relations under the Tacit Security Regime: From 2016 to the Present

The rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the election of the Trump administration, the shift in U.S. policy toward Iran, the signing of the Abraham Accords, and the erosion of the taboo surrounding normalization between Gulf states and Israel collectively constituted major developments that strengthened Saudi-Israeli relations and facilitated closer and more public interactions between the two states. Developments following the Arab Spring, particularly after 2015, further heightened perceptions of the threat posed by the resistance axis among Saudi and Israeli leaders. Moreover, the rise of the Trump administration and the growing influence of anti-Iran groups supported by pro-Israel and Arab-Israeli lobbying networks created favorable conditions for further rapprochement. Structurally, several additional factors contributed to this convergence. The U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement—partly influenced by

coordinated Arab-Israeli lobbying efforts—aligned with the shared interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel and further strengthened bilateral relations. In addition, Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, including the targeted killing of General Qasem Soleimani and the imposition of extensive sanctions, intensified regional tensions and encouraged deeper security cooperation between Israel and the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia (Horowitz, 2024: 63).

These developments resulted in increasingly visible public interactions between Saudi and Israeli officials. In May 2016, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence and a senior member of the royal family, participated alongside General Yaakov Amidror, the former Israeli National Security Advisor, in a public discussion on Middle East security and peace organized by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Previously, Prince Turki had met with Israeli political figures, including Dan Meridor, Meir Sheetrit, Amos Yadlin, and Yair Lapid (Quamar, 2020: 601). During this phase of Saudi-Israeli relations, discussions of normalization gained considerable momentum. Foreign ministers and senior officials from both sides increasingly addressed prospects for normalization and joint initiatives. Accordingly, in September 2023, one month before Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in an interview with Fox News that the normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations was becoming increasingly imminent. Similarly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared at the United Nations that Israel was on the verge of establishing relations with Saudi Arabia (Weissert, 2023). In a related interview with *The Atlantic* in 2022, bin Salman stated: "We do not view Israel as an enemy, but rather as a potential partner in many interests that we can achieve together" (Nereim, 2022). Thus, during this period, Saudi Arabia came closer than ever to pragmatic engagement, viewing domestic, regional, and international developments as increasingly conducive to the normalization of relations with Israel.

Table 2 – Periodization of Relations between the Israel and Saudi Arabia

Period	Time Frame	Key Milestones and Developments
Pre-Existence of the Israel	1920–1948	Limited engagement between Saudi leaders and the Israel despite no active measures to prevent the establishment of Israel; internal Saudi conflicts and foreign policy influenced by British interests in the region.
Period of Mutual Isolation	1948–1980	Israel's involvement in the Arab-Israeli wars and Saudi support for the Palestinian cause. Over time, under the influence of regional developments (Nasserism), international dynamics (bipolarization of the international system), and Israel's victories in all wars, Saudi Arabia gradually moved toward accepting Israel as a regional reality.
Period of Covert Contact	1980–2011	The Iranian Revolution and the rising power of the Iran-led resistance axis, along with international developments such as the end of the Cold War and the emergence of U.S. hegemony, prompted Saudi Arabia to adopt increased pragmatism and cooperation with Israel. These dynamics were reflected in initiatives such as the Fahd Peace Proposal (1981) and the Arab Peace Initiative (2002).
Period of Increasingly Public Relations and Establishment of the Tacit Security Regime	2011–2016	The Arab Spring in 2011 and the geopolitical expansion of the resistance axis in its aftermath, alongside U.S. foreign policy in the region, the development of an offshore balancing strategy, and the signing of the JCPOA, were key factors in enhancing convergence between Israel and Saudi Arabia. During this period, relations became more public, and cooperation was strengthened.
Period of Consolidation and Deepening of Relations under the Tacit Security Regime	2016–Present	The passing of King Abdullah and the ascension of Salman with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman brought fundamental changes in Saudi domestic and foreign policy, including a more assertive stance toward the resistance front and strengthened relations with Israel. Additionally, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President contributed to the consolidation and deepening of Israel's relations with the Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

3. Explaining Riyadh–Tel Aviv Relations within the Framework of the Tacit Security Regime

Writing about the relations between two actors that do not maintain formal diplomatic ties, and whose interactions occur primarily through covert or informal channels, is a challenging and, at times, incomplete task. Since Saudi Arabia and Israel have not normalized their relations, they naturally do not maintain publicly visible political, economic, technological, or military-security interactions. Accordingly, reliable official data are limited. Therefore, building on the preceding discussion—which identified certain covert interactions and potential areas of cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia—this section examines and analyzes the relationship between the two actors within the framework of a tacit security regime. It explains how this concept can be applied to analyze relations that, despite their growing depth and consolidation, have not yet resulted in formal normalization.

3.1. Shared Strategic Interests

Tacit security regimes are formed on the basis of actors' shared perceptions of threats. Within this framework, the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel stems from their common perception of the threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and its regional influence, particularly through the resistance axis. Iran's expanding influence since the 2000s—especially following the collapse of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq (2003), Hezbollah's growing role in Lebanon, and developments following the Arab Spring (2011)—contributed to the geopolitical expansion of the resistance axis. Iran succeeded in extending its influence from Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and beyond through forces such as the Zainabiyoun and Fatemiyoun Brigades, while simultaneously gaining regional legitimacy by positioning itself as a key actor in the fight against terrorism, particularly ISIS. Developments in Yemen and the military successes of the Houthis against the Arab coalition further expanded Iran's geopolitical reach to the Red Sea.

These regional developments caused concern among countries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, which responded by pursuing balancing strategies against Iran. Consequently, the securitization of Iran and policies promoting "Iranophobia" intensified, leading to a heightened perception of the Iranian threat (Grumet, 2015: 62–63). Saudi Arabia—particularly after the political setbacks that followed the Arab Spring, the failures in the Yemeni crisis, and subsequent domestic developments—moved toward pragmatic alignment with Israel. This inclination was reflected in statements by Mohammed bin Salman and Benjamin Netanyahu. Bin Salman noted in an interview with *The New York Times* that cooperation with Israel was beneficial in countering Iran, while Netanyahu described Saudi Arabia as a potential ally (Navidinia & Moradi Klaradeh, 2021: 96). Some analysts, such as Md. Muddassir Quamar, argue that Iran is the primary driver of rapprochement between the Gulf Arab states and Israel, as the shared perception of threat

forms the basis for intelligence, security, and diplomatic cooperation between them (Quamar, 2022: 58). These interactions exemplify a tacit security regime, in which security cooperation emerges from shared strategic interests, particularly those related to countering Iran and the resistance axis.

In addition to Iran, the perceived threat posed by Sunni Islamism, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, has also served as a converging factor in Saudi-Israeli relations. The Arab Spring and the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood in regional politics raised concerns for both parties. This concern was reflected in the securitization of Sunni Islamist movements and in efforts to counter countries supporting them, such as Qatar and Turkey. From Israel's perspective, potential alliances between Islamist groups and the resistance axis posed a strategic challenge, while the Gulf Arab states perceived the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to their political legitimacy (Fakhro, 2024: 59). Therefore, the desire for regional stability and the imperative of countering both the resistance axis led by Iran and Sunni political Islam centered on the Muslim Brotherhood constitute key motivations for the deepening of Saudi-Israeli relations. The pursuit of regional stability—particularly through countering extremist groups and maintaining the balance of power in the Gulf—aligns the strategic objectives of both actors. Their conception of regional stability is broadly consistent with Western perspectives, according to which the region should operate in a manner compatible with Western interests and without revisionist ambitions. However, the events following October 7, 2023, have partially undermined these alignments and raised new questions regarding Israel's regional ambitions.

3.2. External and Systemic Influences

One of the key factors shaping the tacit security regime between Saudi Arabia and Israel is the influence of external actors and structural developments in the international system, particularly U.S. policy. As the dominant power in the international order, the United States has played a significant role in strengthening Riyadh-Tel Aviv relations by shifting its regional strategy from deep engagement toward offshore balancing (Moqoumi & Shariati, 2022: 129). This influence can be understood in two dimensions. First, the rise of China and the declining strategic priority of the Middle East prompted a broader shift in U.S. global strategy. Second, specific U.S. foreign policy decisions generated uncertainty among traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel (New & Wu, 2022: 117). During the Obama administration, the strategy of "leading from behind" sought to reduce direct U.S. involvement while encouraging regional allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security (Abbasi & Taheri, 2019: 8). This approach intensified during the Trump administration and continued under President Biden. Accordingly, Washington has attempted to compensate for its reduced direct involvement by supporting regional alignments, such as the Abraham Accords, while simultaneously limiting the

expansion of Chinese and Russian influence. Encouraging Arab states to normalize relations with Israel has therefore become part of a broader U.S. strategy for safeguarding its regional interests without extensive direct intervention.

The U.S. revival of a "dual-pillar" approach, reminiscent of the Nixon Doctrine, seeks to establish a liberal regional order based on its two principal allies: Saudi Arabia and Israel. Within this framework, Saudi Arabia functions as a soft-balancing force against Islamism, whereas Israel serves as the principal military deterrent against the resistance axis (Moqoumi & Shariati, 2022: 143). This perspective is also reflected in statements by Arab officials. For example, Salman Al-Ansari described Saudi Arabia and Israel as "the two new pillars of regional stability" (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 26). At the same time, growing doubts regarding the reliability of U.S. security guarantees have encouraged closer Riyadh-Tel Aviv relations. Washington's limited response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities and Emirati positions in Fujairah, together with the signing of the JCPOA, generated uncertainty regarding U.S. commitments to its traditional allies (Moqoumi & Javdanimoghadam, 2022: 200). Similarly, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, reports of possible withdrawals from Syria and Iraq, and the absence of a military response to Iran's downing of a U.S. drone reinforced these concerns (Horowitz, 2024: 22). Consequently, Arab states increasingly concluded that they would need to rely on regional balancing in cooperation with Israel to enhance their own security. Within this context, Saudi Arabia has viewed the prospect of normalization with Israel as a means of adapting to the emerging regional order (Friedman, 2022: 199).

Furthermore, regional competition for geopolitical influence constitutes another important factor shaping Saudi-Israeli relations. As the leading Gulf power, Saudi Arabia views the power-maximizing ambitions of other Gulf states with caution. The growing regional ambitions of the United Arab Emirates over the past two decades have heightened tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, particularly regarding Yemen (Jalal, 2024). Accordingly, Abu Dhabi's expanding ties with Tel Aviv and its increasing geopolitical influence—supported by stronger U.S. backing—may affect Saudi-UAE relations (Lotfi & Nourmohammadi, 2023: 236). This dynamic may encourage Saudi leaders to strengthen relations with Israel in order to avoid falling behind the UAE in regional influence and to maintain their strategic credibility in Washington. In addition, regional competition with Qatar and Turkey, both of which support particular Islamist movements, continues to shape Saudi perceptions of Israel.

3.3. Constraints and Obstacles

Despite the shared regional threat perceptions that have driven closer ties, Saudi Arabia and Israel continue to face significant constraints that hinder the full normalization—or, more precisely, the public normalization—of their relations. These constraints can be grouped into two broad categories:

(1) domestic constraints, particularly public opinion, and (2) limited trust among political elites.

One of the most significant obstacles remains the Palestinian issue. As a leading supporter of the Palestinian cause within the Arab world and a self-proclaimed leader of the Arab and Islamic worlds, Saudi Arabia cannot fully normalize relations with Tel Aviv without meaningful progress toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to data from the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 92 percent of respondents across the Arab world regard the Palestinian issue as the region's most important concern. This perception reinforces the sensitivity of public opinion in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim-majority societies toward normalization with Israel. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the most favorable conditions for normalization would exist if the Palestinian issue were no longer a central concern on the international agenda and, more importantly, if it received limited public attention, particularly through social media, within Saudi society and the broader region. However, developments following Operation Al-Aqsa Storm on October 7, 2023, not only failed to facilitate this process but instead significantly complicated it because of the unprecedented scale of Israeli military operations in Gaza and their broader regional repercussions. These developments fundamentally altered the regional environment. The extensive destruction in Gaza and military operations in Lebanon have deepened distrust toward Israel across Arab public opinion. According to a 2024 survey, only 4 percent of Arabs support recognizing Israel, while in Saudi Arabia opposition to normalization increased from 38 percent in 2022 to 68 percent in 2024 (Moghavemi, 2024: 33).

Figure 4 – Considering Palestine as the Central Issue of the Muslim World
(Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024: 19)

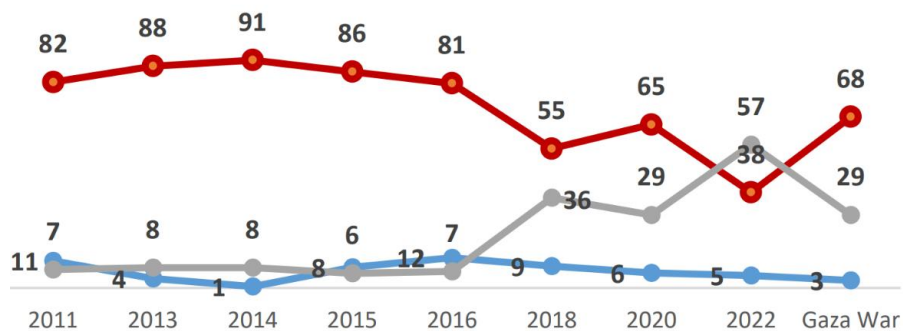


Figure 5 – Public Approval or Disapproval of Saudi Arabia's Recognition of Israel
(Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024: 19)

In another survey conducted by the Washington Institute between November 14 and December 6, 2023, 96% of Saudis stated that "Arab countries should immediately cut all diplomatic, political, economic, and

other forms of contact with Israel because of its military actions in Gaza." Following the October 7 attacks, public perceptions of Hamas within the Kingdom improved significantly, with 40% of respondents expressing a favorable view of the movement (compared with 10% in a previous survey conducted in August). Moreover, nearly 87% of Saudis agreed with the statement that "recent events show that Israel is so weak and internally divided that it could one day be defeated" (Cleveland & Pollock, 2023).

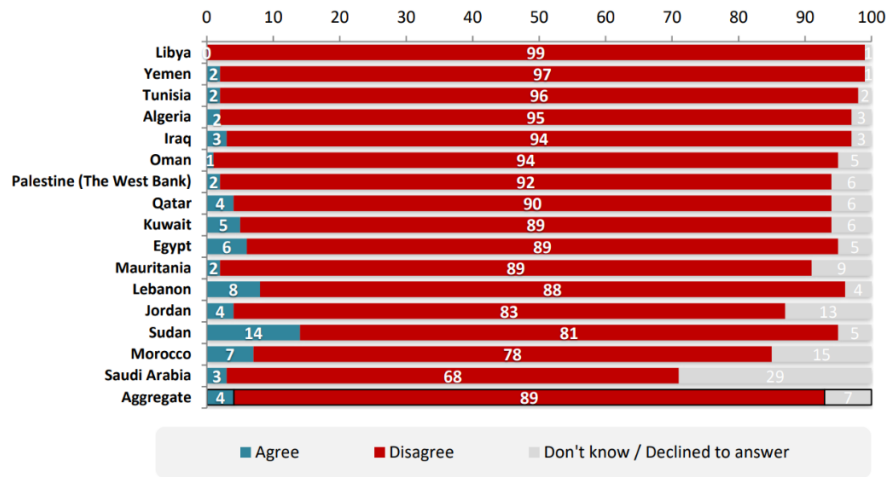


Figure 6 - Recognition of the Israeli Regime by the Arab World (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024: 19)

Such conditions are not confined to the Palestinian side alone. The Israeli regime, whose colonial character has been inherent since its establishment and has become embedded in the behavior of its society, represents another domestic constraint on the normalization of Riyadh-Tel Aviv relations. The rise of right-wing and religious-nationalist extremism, increasingly reflected in the regime's electoral outcomes, has intensified anti-Palestinian sentiment within Israeli society and reduced the government's flexibility in peace initiatives, negotiations, and concessions. This trend has deepened further in the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, accompanied by heightened feelings of insecurity among the Israeli population. According to a Gallup poll, only one in four Israeli adults currently supports the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, while a majority (65%) opposes it.

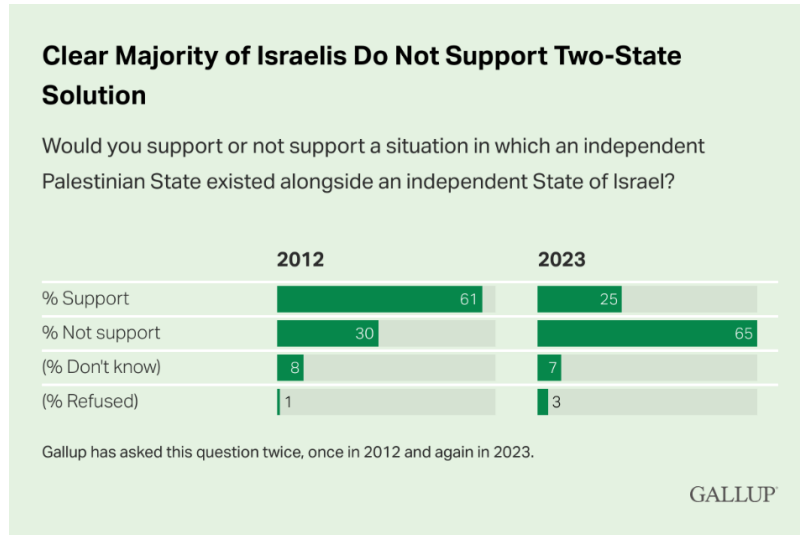


Figure 7 – Support for the Two-State Solution and the Establishment of a Palestinian State in Israel (Gallup, 2023)

Moreover, although one in four Israelis supports the two-state solution, only a small minority believe that lasting peace between Israel and Palestine is achievable. Between 2006 and 2017, an average of 29% of Israelis believed that enduring peace was possible. By 2023, however, this figure had fallen to 13%, while 74% believed that lasting peace between Israel and Palestine was unattainable.

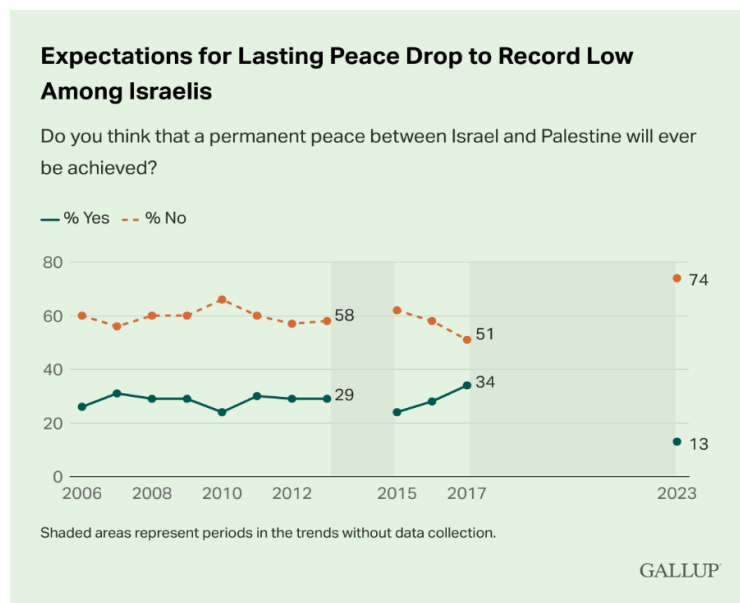


Figure 8 – Level of optimism regarding the achievement of lasting peace in occupied Palestine (Gallup, 2023)

Therefore, the Palestinian issue constitutes an obstacle to the normalization of relations for both parties. In this context, developments in Palestine, resulting from the increasing oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli regime, periodically elevate the Palestinian issue to the foremost issue in the region and the Arab world, a trend that reached its peak following the events of October 7. Saudi Arabia, which presents itself as the leader of the Arab and Islamic worlds, perceives the normalization of relations with Israel without meaningful progress on the Palestinian issue as diminishing its regional legitimacy and therefore remains cautious about pursuing it. At the same time, Saudi Arabia requires progress on the Palestinian issue to maintain domestic legitimacy and to persuade the majority of its population, which supports the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, Israel—because of domestic political conditions and broader social developments (Moghavemi & Javdani Moghaddam, 2022: 120), as well as geopolitical constraints (Moghavemi & Firouzkuhi, 2024: 127)—has lost much of the flexibility required to make concessions on the Palestinian issue in order to facilitate normalization with Saudi Arabia. In other words, one of the principal domestic obstacles to advancing normalization is the strong opposition among segments of Israeli society and political elites to the two-state solution and to granting additional rights to the Palestinians. Many right-wing political parties and religious-nationalist groups regard this issue as a red line and are unwilling to make concessions.

Another factor complicating the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is the absence of shared normative values and the persistence of mutual distrust, both of which are characteristic features of a tacit security regime. Although a tacit security regime provides a framework for cooperation in various fields—particularly in the security domain—it does not eliminate competition or distrust between the participating actors. Since states are generally assumed to behave as rational actors, Israel also recognizes the importance of maintaining the regional balance of power and preventing its disruption. Consequently, Israel remains cautious about the growth of Saudi capabilities, particularly in the military sphere and with regard to the acquisition of advanced weapons and military technology. In this regard, Jones and Guzansky observe in *Fraternal Enemies*: "Although the Gulf kingdoms have never directly engaged with Israel, the possibility that these new weapons may one day be directed at Israel cannot be ruled out." Therefore, "just as cognitive limitations regarding the Palestinian issue constitute the main obstacle to more overt cooperation, nuclear ambitions equally raise doubts regarding the scope of these relations" (Jones & Guzansky, 2023: 147–150).

3.4. Informal Cooperation Mechanisms

Despite strategic commonalities and shared security interests, relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have remained largely covert and informal. The primary reason for this situation lies in domestic constraints, including

public sensitivity, religious and nationalist pressures, and mutual distrust among the elites on both sides. These factors have led both actors to prefer clandestine diplomacy as a lower-cost and more effective approach to achieving their security and strategic objectives (Yaari, 2021: 58). Empirical evidence supports this pattern. For instance, an Israeli minister publicly acknowledged covert contacts with Saudi Arabia as early as 2017 (Reuters, 2017), and in 2020, high-level secret meetings were reported between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Reuters, 2020; Halbfinger & Hubbard, 2020). This pattern of behavior aligns closely with the logic of tacit security regimes. A tacit security regime represents an informal and unwritten arrangement in which actors cooperate operationally—and often secretly—without formal or public commitments. Within this framework, shared security concerns and the need to confront common threats constitute the primary basis for the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv.

However, the lack of mutual trust, concerns over domestic and regional repercussions, and public pressure prevent these relations from evolving into a formal alliance. More precisely, the current relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel can be analyzed within the framework of a "quasi-alliance" or as occupying a "gray zone." This conceptual space in international relations theory lies between full alliance and neutrality. Within this space, security, intelligence, and even technological cooperation take place among states without overt diplomatic commitments or formal political partnerships (Niu & Wu, 2022: 117). Relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv operate according to this realist logic, in which the principle of plausible deniability plays a central role. Indeed, leaked Pentagon documents revealed a framework of secret military and intelligence cooperation involving Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other Arab states under CENTCOM's supervision, including joint exercises and coordination on counter-tunnel operations (Ynetnews, 2025). These activities were deliberately kept out of the public domain to preserve plausible deniability for all parties. Covert diplomacy between the two actors is conducted primarily through channels such as third-party mediation, informal security meetings, high-level intelligence communications, and unofficial economic interactions. In some cases, cooperation also takes place through international platforms, including multilateral security forums and global assemblies, which facilitate informal contacts without imposing significant political costs on the parties.

Moreover, cybersecurity and the protection of critical infrastructure constitute another area of informal cooperation, often pursued by the security and intelligence agencies of both countries. This clandestine approach also enables Saudi leaders to shield themselves from the domestic consequences of publicly normalizing relations with Israel, particularly in light of the Palestinian issue and the events of October 7. Public opinion in Saudi Arabia and the broader Arab world has traditionally been highly sensitive to any rapprochement with Israel. Maintaining these cooperative ties at a covert

level therefore represents a strategy for minimizing domestic political costs. Conversely, Israel, because of its historical experience and concerns about transferring sensitive technologies to Arab states, remains reluctant to engage in full and formal cooperation. Such concerns, particularly regarding Saudi access to advanced military or nuclear technologies, have repeatedly been raised within Israeli security circles (Guzansky & Shavit, 2025). Consequently, alongside political and ideological obstacles, strategic considerations also inhibit the formation of a formal alliance.

In summary, clandestine diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and Israel reflects strategic realism operating under domestic and regional constraints. This mode of cooperation, defined within the framework of a tacit security regime, allows both parties to pursue their security interests without directly incurring the political and social costs associated with full diplomatic normalization.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the tacit security regime between Saudi Arabia and Israel functions as a pragmatic response to shared threat perceptions, most notably those associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the resistance axis, within the broader context of the changing U.S. strategy of offshore balancing and the regional upheavals that followed 2011, including the collapse of Ba'athist rule in Iraq, Hezbollah's expanding role, and Iran's growing influence in Yemen and Syria. This regime, characterized by informal mechanisms such as intelligence sharing, clandestine meetings, and behind-the-scenes diplomacy, enables both actors to pursue their strategic interests without incurring the political costs associated with formal normalization. Unlike the expectations of liberal functionalism, convergence in this case begins with security concerns and only subsequently extends to economic and technological cooperation. The tacit security regime therefore represents a distinct form of interstate alignment in the Middle East, in which shared strategic interests temporarily outweigh identity-based and domestic political constraints.

However, this regime remains inherently fragile and informal because of several interrelated constraints. Domestically, Saudi Arabia faces intense public sensitivity regarding the Palestinian issue and Arab-Islamic identity, while Israel contends with the rise of far-right political forces and persistent security concerns about transferring advanced military or nuclear technologies to Riyadh. Externally, the unresolved Palestinian issue continues to constitute a fundamental obstacle to overt normalization. Mutual distrust, reinforced by the absence of shared normative frameworks and by competing regional rivalries involving Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, further prevents the tacit security regime from evolving into a formal and public alliance. These constraints underscore the regime's

conditional and reversible character, distinguishing it from conventional security alliances and highlighting its vulnerability to political shocks.

The developments following October 7, 2023, have placed unprecedented pressure on this tacit security regime. The Gaza war, rising civilian casualties, and renewed public outrage across the Arab world have significantly constrained the Saudi leadership's room for maneuver, compelling Riyadh to distance itself publicly from normalization while potentially maintaining covert channels of communication. The events of October 7, followed by the regional escalation, have fundamentally altered the regional landscape and generated considerable uncertainty. Although the perceived threat from Iran has intensified, the simultaneous rise in public protest and the declining legitimacy of the Israeli government, both regionally and internationally, have confronted the Saudi leadership with a difficult strategic dilemma. Nevertheless, the concept of the tacit security regime continues to provide a useful framework for explaining the trajectory of Saudi-Israeli relations in the short to medium term.

These developments give rise to several important questions for future research.

To what extent has the post-October 7 environment altered the cost-benefit calculations of both parties? Can the tacit security regime withstand sustained public opinion pressure across the Arab and Islamic worlds, or is it likely to experience gradual erosion or even collapse?

Will the resilience of this regime depend primarily on the continuation of the Iranian threat, including nuclear developments and regional proxy activities, or can new drivers, such as economic megaprojects (e.g., NEOM), GCC-Israel technological cooperation, or changes in U.S. regional policy, compensate for the increasing costs of political legitimacy?

Under what conditions might the regime evolve from tacit cooperation to explicit normalization, and under what circumstances might it instead collapse? Comparative analyses of other "gray zone" alignments, including those established by Gulf states following the Abraham Accords, may provide valuable analytical insights.

Addressing these questions through further empirical research, particularly by employing process tracing, elite interviews, and the analysis of leaked documents and diplomatic communications, will be essential for assessing the long-term sustainability of tacit Saudi-Israeli cooperation and its implications for regional stability. The post-2023 period offers a valuable natural experiment for testing the limits of realist-inspired informal security regimes in the face of powerful normative and popular backlash.

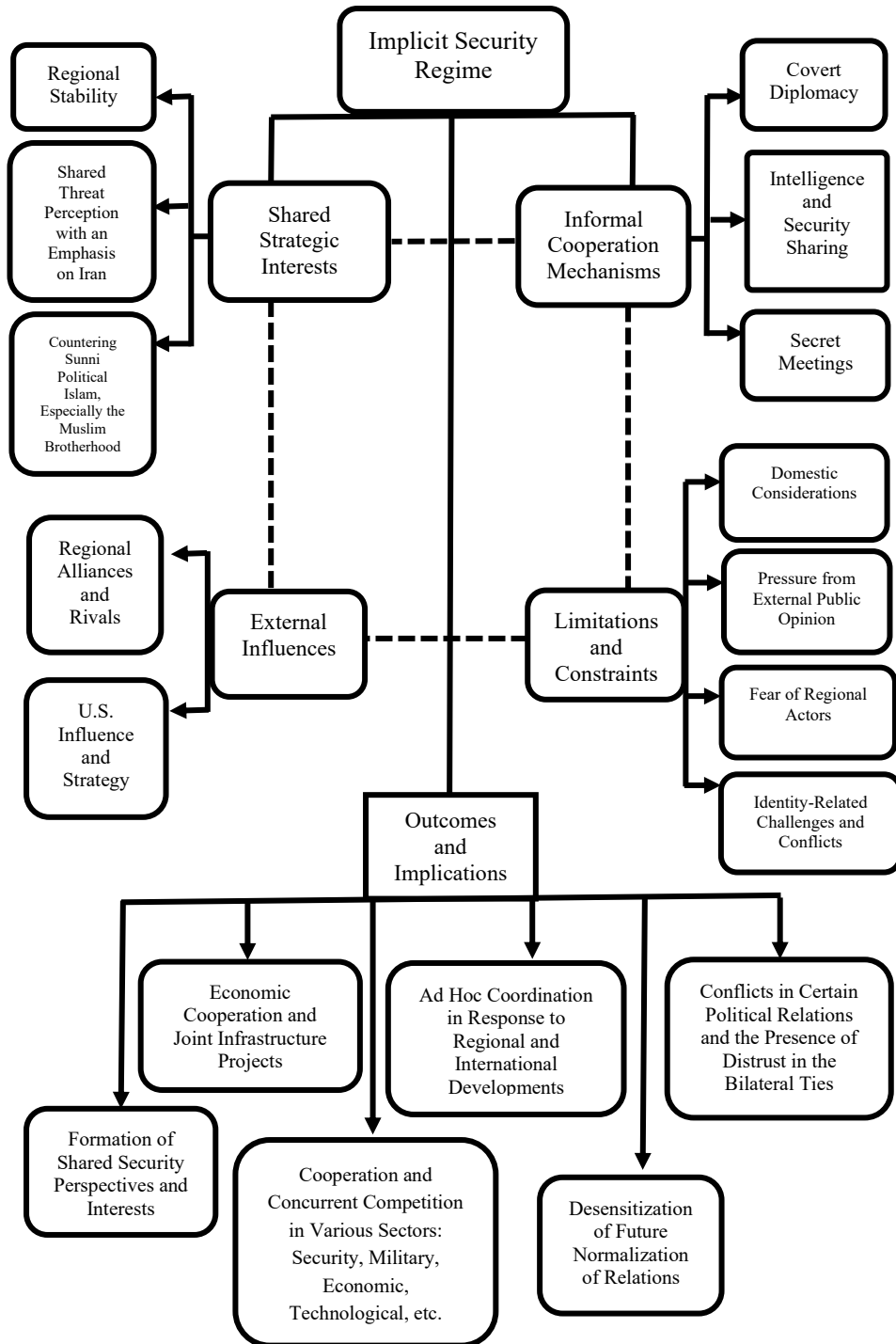


Figure 9 – The Tacit Security Regime and the Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel (Illustrated by the Author)

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