



An Assessment Of Saudi Arabia's Actions In The Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Abstract

The Israel-Palestine conflict is an issue that holds significant importance for Saudi Arabia. Resolving the Palestinian issue has been a core component of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, formally established in 1943 as a benchmark of its diplomatic commitment and leadership in the Muslim world. State actions are shaped by interpretations, meanings, and national self-image in the international system. In this context, Saudi Arabia would be expected to consistently support Palestine to uphold its identity and leadership role as a regional power. However, in reality, Saudi Arabia has adopted a neutral stance that contrasts with traditional expectations. This research aims to assess the underlying reasons behind Saudi Arabia's neutrality in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The analysis employs Neorealism, particularly John Mearsheimer's theory, emphasizing the Balance of Power as the primary analytical framework, with alliances and the pursuit of increasing power as key concepts. The findings show that Saudi Arabia's strategic rivalry with Iran is a significant factor influencing this shift. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran aggressively expanded its influence across the Middle East. In response, Saudi Arabia, seeking to counterbalance Iran's growing power and secure its own position, recalibrated its foreign policy. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's neutral stance as its strategic prioritization of containing Iranian dominance in the Middle East region.

Key Words: Israel-Palestine Conflict, Neorealism, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Geopolitics

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INTRODUCTION

The Israel-Palestine conflict stems from a territorial dispute between Palestinian Arabs and Jews. The conflict escalated in 1947 when the United Nations (UN) passed Resolution 181, which proposed the partition of Palestinian territory into two states, namely the Arab state and the Jewish state. Palestine firmly rejected this resolution, and responded with attacks on Israel's defense areas in Jerusalem, Ashkelon, and Tel Aviv (Badjodah, et al., 2021). These attacks were carried out through suicide bombings by the Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups. In this context, The Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups are two major political and militant groups in Palestine. Furthermore, the rejection of Resolution 181 led to the outbreak of the first Israel-Palestine war in 1948 (Badjodah, et al., 2021). In this first war, Israel won and declared the establishment of the state of Israel. In addition, for its victory, Israel managed to occupy the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. As a result, much of the Palestinian population has remained under Israeli control to this day. The Israel-Palestine territorial conflict has become an unresolved contemporary issue due to the existence of normalization with Israel's foreign relations across the region (Black, 2019).

In essence, normalization is the process of making something previously considered abnormal appear acceptable or standard (Estreicher, 2016; Billah et al., 2023). In this case, what is being normalized is Israel's colonial actions toward Palestine. Under Mohammad bin Salman's secular reforms, Saudi Arabia has become one of the actors normalizing this case. This is indicated by the renewal of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel on August 13 2020, despite the Saudi Arabia previous refusal to recognize Israel's statehood (Billah et al., 2023). This shift is marked by the easing of economic restrictions on Israel and growing cooperation in technology, medicine, intelligence, and military fields (Carter, 2021). Through these actions, Saudi Arabia indirectly normalizes Israel's treatment towards Palestine. Furthermore, Israel claims its actions are defensive responses to the October 7 Hamas attacks, attacks, yet these claims are often viewed as rhetorical tools to justify broader offensive strategies (Carter, 2021). As diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel strengthen, Saudi Arabia appears increasingly neutral regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. This stance contradicts the image Saudi Arabia projects as a leading power in the Middle East. Nonetheless, complete neutrality is complicated by statements from Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, who affirmed that Saudi Arabia remains committed to advocating for Palestinian dignity and rights (Carter, 2021).

However, Saudi Arabia's stance toward Israel has raised questions, given its significant influence in the Middle East. As a key regional power, Saudi Arabia's

response to the Israel-Palestine conflict is crucial, as it can shape the broader dynamics of the issue. The conflict itself holds symbolic importance for Saudi Arabia, as the Palestinian cause has long been central to its foreign policy. This commitment was formally established in 1943 and has since served as a benchmark for the success of its international agenda. Ideally, Saudi Arabia would be expected to support Palestine and oppose Israeli actions. However, in practice, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more neutral position. This became evident when Saudi Arabia and Israel officially announced the normalization of their diplomatic relations (Baqi, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neorealism

Neorealism is a theory of international relations developed by John Mearsheimer, a political scientist from the University of Chicago. According to Mearsheimer, neorealism is a structural theory that emphasizes the importance of the international system in shaping state behavior. Neorealism assumes that states are the main actors in international relations and are driven by the pursuit of power and security (Sugeng, 2022). In addition, Mearsheimer argues that the international system is anarchic, where there is no existence of an authoritative power that can force states to comply with rules and laws (Sugeng, 2022). Therefore, each state must fight to protect itself from threats from other states. This leads to the survival reaction of each state by increasing their power to protect themselves. Power in this context includes not only military power, but also economic, political and cultural power. Thus, states with greater power have a stronger position in the international system and able to protect themselves from threats.

Mearsheimer's version of neorealism, commonly referred to as offensive realism, places a strong emphasis on the critical role of relative power in determining and shaping state behavior within the anarchic international system (Steinsson, 2014). According to the perspective of offensive realists, states are inherently driven by a desire not merely to preserve the existing balance of power or maintain the status quo, but to actively seek opportunities to maximize their power and influence whenever possible. This drive stems from the fundamental belief that accumulating greater power is the most effective means for ensuring state survival in an uncertain and competitive global environment. Consequently, states are expected to engage in aggressive strategies, including but not limited to territorial expansion, military build-up, and power projection beyond their immediate borders, as a way to enhance their relative position *vis-à-vis* others. Offensive realism further rests on the assumption that states are rational actors, meaning they are capable of systematically evaluating both their own national interests and the actions,

capabilities, and intentions of other states in the international arena (Steinsson, 2014). Through rational calculation, states aim to navigate the complex structure of international relations in ways that optimize their security and maximize their influence, often leading to competition and conflict.

Furthermore, according to Mearsheimer, states are rational actors that consistently strive to maximize their power as a fundamental strategy for survival within an anarchic international system where no overarching authority exists to enforce order (Dugis, 2016). In this anarchic environment, power balancing becomes an essential mechanism for maintaining stability. Without a central authority, the survival of a state depends heavily on its ability to secure and enhance its relative power compared to other states. Mearsheimer emphasizes that the existence of multiple great powers is necessary to sustain a *Balance of Power*, which serves as a check against the dominance of any single state. In his book "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*", Mearsheimer argues that rational states should not only seek to maximize their power but also aim to achieve a hegemonic position, at least at the regional level. Ideally, if possible, they should extend this dominance globally. For Mearsheimer, the pursuit of regional and global hegemony is the key strategy for a state's security, enabling it to minimize threats and ensure its survival amidst the uncertainties of the international structure.

In the context of Neorealism theory developed by Mearsheimer, this study emphasize the use of *Balance of Power* as the main analytical tool, with the specification of concepts, namely *Alliances* and *Increasing Power*. To provide a clearer understanding of these concepts, the author includes a table outlining the definitions according to Mearsheimer.

Table 1. Definition of Alliances and Increasing Power According to Mearsheimer

Concept	Definition
Alliance	The anarchic nature of the international system means that there is no central authority or government that can fully protect states or manage their behavior. Due to of this situation, states often feel uncertain and insecure about their safety and future. To deal with these challenges, states are encouraged to focus on strengthening their security and building up their capabilities. One of the most common strategies used to achieve this goal is by forming alliances with other states. Alliances allow states to work together and support each other against threats they might not be able to handle alone. According to Mearsheimer, alliances are mainly created to respond to external threats from other states or actors. States choose their allies carefully, based on shared interests and common enemies, so that they can protect themselves more effectively. This behavior is based on the idea that states act rationally, meaning they think carefully about how to survive and succeed in an uncertain world. By forming alliances, states not only try to increase their own strength but also aim to build a sense of collective security with others.

Increasing Power	According to Mearsheimer, power is a goal that must be achieved by every state because the purpose of the state interacting in international relations is to become a hegemon so that the policies made by the state must be oriented towards achieving maximum power (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the midst of an anarchic international system, every state is responsible for its own survival. Without a guarantee of protection from a higher power, states naturally feel insecure and vulnerable. As a result, they are encouraged to strengthen themselves in order survive and protect their national interests.
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The use of these two core concepts within Mearsheimer's framework of neorealism forms the foundation for constructing the research hypothesis of this study, which can be elaborated as follows:

1. The application of the *Alliances* concept in Mearsheimer's theory of *Balance of Power* explains Saudi Arabia's neutral stance toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This neutrality is interpreted as a strategic move driven by Saudi Arabia's affiliation with Israel and the United States in forming a quasi-anti-Iran alliance. The *Alliance* emerges as a response to the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East, where countering Iran's growing influence becomes a more immediate priority for Saudi Arabia than providing direct support for the Palestinian cause.
2. The application of the concept of Increasing Power in Mearsheimer's Balance of Power theory highlights that Iran's expanding dominance across the Middle East is perceived as a serious threat to Arab unity and regional stability. Faced with this reality, Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain its hegemony and ensure regional security by aligning itself with Israel. Given Israel's superiority in the military and technological sectors, such cooperation is seen as a pragmatic step, which ultimately justifies Saudi Arabia's neutral position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

METHOD

This research employs the qualitative method as outlined by Creswell (2014), which is specifically designed to explore, interpret, and understand complex social phenomena through descriptive and interpretative data collection techniques. The qualitative approach seeks to provide in-depth insights into social dynamics by describing and analyzing data obtained directly from the field or credible secondary sources. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on measuring and analyzing numerical data to establish patterns and generalizations, qualitative research emphasizes the importance of context, meaning, and subjective experiences that cannot be captured through statistical measurements. It requires a deeper understanding of the social context in which they occur. In this study, the data are primarily derived from written sources such as scholarly articles, academic

journals, and verified data repositories. By employing a qualitative approach, the research aims to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It seeks to examine the religious, cultural, economic, and political factors that interconnect and contribute to the complexity of the issue.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Influence of Religion on Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

Essentially, the foreign policy passed by Saudi Arabia is influenced by several aspects, namely religion, culture, and politics (Carter, 2021). In the conflict that occurred between Saudi Arabia-Israel, in the past, religion was not the main factor underlying these conditions. However, cultural and political factors are the basis of these conditions. This is based on the ability of the people of Saudi Arabia and Israel to coexist with religious differences between them. Wahabbi, which is one of the schools of Sunni Islam, is the official religion of Saudi Arabia, while Judaism is the official religion of Israel. However, the main barrier between Arab countries and Israel is the difference in justifying Israel's existence as a state. In the past, Saudi Arabia was reluctant to recognize Israel due to its actions towards Palestine. In this case, traditional monarchies run by emphasizing Wahabi principles have managed to influence Arab attitudes towards Israel through regimes based on fatwas issued by clerics. Ibn Al-Wahhab's teachings emphasized that the people of Saudi Arabia could coexist peacefully, in accordance with the messages contained in the Qur'an. At this time, the politics that prevailed in Saudi Arabia used the principle of *ta'at wali al-amr* (Carter, 2021).

The Ulama at that time, condemned Israel's actions due to its offensive actions against Palestine. The implementation of the principle of *ta'at wali al-amr* is illustrated by the establishment of standards for the successful implementation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy tasks and missions based on the resolution of the Palestinian issue. The concept was formulated in 1943 by setting two schemes. The first scheme set to resolve the conflict that occurred in Palestine was Saudi Arabia initiated the unification of Arab countries to help resolve the conflict. The second scheme set is Saudi Arabia influencing the United States to get involved in solving the Palestinian case (Billah et al., 2023). However, in reality, the concept that was formulated in 1943 was not fully implemented. Saudi Arabia has made a policy shift in addressing Israel.

Over time, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy continued to develop until it produced a controversial foreign policy, namely the close relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States and limited cooperation with Israel (Carter, 2021). In making this decision, Saudi Arabia uses the role of the clerics to silence those who oppose

its policies. Although the Saudi Arabian Monarchy system always relies on religious institutions in legitimizing a policy, the ulama' who are included in it will always be subject to monarchical power. Thus, with the principle of *ta'at wali al-amr*, policymakers will always use the position of the ulama to ensure public obedience to the political ruler (Carter, 2021). Saudi Arabia's policy-making system, which requires the legitimacy of the Ulama in policy-making, has led to the perception that religious factors are the dominant factor in the policy-making consideration process. Basically, the relationship between monarchical power and Wahabi Ulama is an unequal alliance. The monarchy uses the legitimacy of the ulama to legalize its policies in exchange for the monarchy helping to spread Wahabi teachings through the construction of Wahabi schools (Carter, 2021).

The inequality between the monarchy and the clerics is demonstrated by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's coercion of the clerics to comply with his policy of limiting the issuance of clerical fatwas (Carter, 2021). However, to date, there are no examples that show that Wahabi clerics have ever forced the monarchy to comply with its policies (Carter, 2021). In strengthening a policy that is made, Wahabi clerics use the interpretation of the Quran as a basis for issuing a fatwa. However, in Saudi Arabia's policy shift to normalize Israel's actions, the Wahabi doctrine did not drive the birth of the policy, so the interests of the monarchy became the dominant aspect. In essence, the Wahabi Ulama has declared that it rejects Saudi Arabia's policy using the principle of *Al Wala' wal Bara'*. However, in this case, the Ulama are unable to apply the principle because the application of the principle requires the approval of the monarchy (Carter, 2021).

Implications of the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between Arab-Israeli Countries on Saudi Arabia's Passive Actions in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

In 2002 during the Arab League Summit in Beirut, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah launched the Arab Peace Initiative as a sign of a major change in the Arab approach which previously had a hardline rejectionist attitude towards Israel (Arafat, 2022). Normalization is defined by Bartson (2013) as a process of realizing a mutual agreement with the aim of ending a conflict through ceasefires, peace agreements between the two parties, and previously agreed diplomatic relations (in Derajat & Kurniawan, 2022). The normalization of Israel's relations with several Arab countries has occurred for a long time when looking at historical factors, especially Israel's normalization with Egypt and Jordan which occurred around 1978 when these Arab countries were involved in a war with Israel (Derajat & Kurniawan, 2022).

After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, Saudi Arabia began to be seen approaching Israel secretly on the grounds of national security considerations because the United States-Iran at that time created an evolutionary path for their relationship which directly influenced changes in Saudi Arabia's power in the Gulf Region as well as the creation of two parallel *alliances* between the US-Israel and the US-Saudi Arabia in response to the increasingly strong Iranian threat coupled with the occurrence of the Arab Spring made the confrontation between Saudi Arabia-Iran intensified which finally made Saudi Arabia aggressively announce its diplomatic relations with Israel in strengthening further security cooperation (Arafat, 2022; Niu & Wu, 2021). The normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel is inseparable from the influence of the politics of normalization of the United States (US), which creates an agreement to normalize Israel's relations with Arab countries which is actually also closely related to US interests in the Middle East, especially during the leadership of President Donald Trump (Derajat & Kurniawan, 2022; Diyauddin, et al, 2023).

Arab countries perceive Israel as a superior state, particularly in the fields of military strength and technological advancement, which contributes to the creation of new political opportunities for status quo regimes in the region. These regimes, many of which had been destabilized or challenged by the popular uprisings during the Arab Spring, find in Israel's capabilities a chance to secure external support and thereby reinforce their hold on power (Minhajuddin & Umam, 2023). The gradual development of bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel increasingly reflects this dynamic. Initially characterized by frequent secret meetings between high-ranking officials from both countries, these interactions have gradually shifted toward more public and open engagements. This progression is largely driven by the shared strategic interest in countering Iran's growing influence in the region, leading to the formation of an informal anti-Iran alliance, or quasi-coalition, involving the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. As a result, the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel has attracted significant attention from the international community. This is primarily because both countries are seen as major regional powers whose cooperation could reshape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and potentially alter long-standing alliances and rivalries (Arafat, 2022).

The existence of national interests owned by each country serves as a key reason behind the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. This normalization is pursued with the goal of fulfilling important state objectives, such as maintaining regional hegemony, ensuring national security, and boosting economic development. For Saudi Arabia, these interests have led to a more passive stance in responding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather than taking active

measures to defend Palestinian interests as in previous decades, Saudi Arabia has recalibrated its priorities based on broader regional threats. In this context, the Saudi government views Iran's growing influence and ambitions in the Middle East as a greater and more immediate threat to regional peace and stability than the unresolved Palestinian issue. Consequently, normalizing ties with Israel is seen as a strategic step to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position against Iran and preserve its own national security. This pragmatic shift reflects the evolving nature of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, where strategic calculations increasingly outweigh traditional ideological commitments (Minhajuddin & Umam, 2023).

Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry in the Middle East Region

The long-standing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has reached its peak after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In the historical aspect, the change of leadership by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini brought significant changes, with the emergence of a new goal to "Establish Iran as a regional power through Shia Islam". The arrival of this transformation came as a surprise to the Sunni Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia, which traditionally considered itself the leader of the Muslim world. Due to, at the center of Saudi Arabia's beliefs lies its position as the custodian of the two holy places in Islam, namely Mecca and Medina (Khan, 2020; Umam, 2022).

On the other hand, Iran believes that political dynamics in the Muslim world need to be seen as a force for change in a region that has long been exploited by the United States and other Western countries. Despite the limitations imposed by years of sanctions and Western interference in its domestic affairs, coupled with Iran's lack of oil money dependence on Saudi Arabia, Iran's foreign policy direction focuses on developing proxy wars. This strategy involves providing support to armed groups in other countries and supporting sympathetic regimes, such as the support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria (Khan, 2020). Through this approach, Iran has succeeded in forming its own regional network, the majority of which consists of Shia Muslim entities. In addition, Iran has succeeded in *Increasing Power* in the Middle East region to build its regional power. Furthermore, Iran has long supported Hamas, a Sunni Islamic movement that came to power in Gaza in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, creates a complex dynamic in regional relations, where Iran, while dominant in supporting Shia entities, also has engagement with Sunni groups such as Hamas.

Regarding the complexity of regional relations in the Middle East region, it cannot be separated from the Arab Spring events that reflect interactions involving Arab-Sunni countries, Israel, and the United States. As a result, a conception of threat from Iran emerged, which was considered as a party that always threatened the stability of the Middle East region in the wave of Arab Spring events that took place

(Minhajuddin & Umar, 2023). Over time, Iran's growing dominance has become a major factor shaping the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. Iran along with the United States has a significant role to play in security fluctuations in the region. Therefore, the tense relationship between Iran and the United States has also become one of the triggers of security and peace instability in the Middle East (Jalalpoor & Sharfi, 2016).

In this case, Saudi Arabia, emphasizing its role as the leader of the Muslim world, acknowledges the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. However, rather than explicitly defending Palestinian interests, Saudi Arabia is more concerned about the expansion of Iranian dominance in the Middle East region which has the potential to cause a proxy war between Sunnis and Shias (Rynhold & Yaari, 2019). Proactively, Saudi Arabia and the United States seek to mediate peace between Middle Eastern Muslim countries and Israel. Xu, et. al (2021) highlight the interests between actors who design normalization of relations, such as the agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Thus, the political dynamics manifested in diplomatic normalization between Middle Eastern Muslim countries and Israel reflect the results of the construction of agreements between the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia as a result of Iran's *increasing power* behavior in expanding influence in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia underwent a change in foreign policy regarding Israel, in which religious, cultural and political factors played an important role. In the beginning, religion was not a major factor in the conflict with Israel, but cultural and political factors were more dominant. Despite Wahabi, the Sunni school of Islam, being the official religion in Saudi Arabia, the main barrier against Israel was the justification for its existence. The Saudi monarchy, with its principle of *ta'at wali al-amr*, managed to influence attitudes towards Israel through Ulama fatwas.

Over time, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy evolved to be controversial, especially in its relations with the United States and limited cooperation with Israel. Religious factors, especially the role of Wahabi clerics, remain relevant in legitimizing policy, despite the inequality between the monarchy and the clerics. The normalization of relations with Israel in some Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, is seen as a response to regional tensions with Iran. This decision is based on state interests, such as maintaining hegemony, maintaining security and boosting the economy, with a focus on the Iranian threat.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a major factor in the political dynamics in the Middle East. After the Iranian Revolution, there was a shift in Iran's power

and strategy in supporting groups in the region. Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, responded by recognizing the Iranian threat, even if this affected attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Normalizing relations with Israel is also understood as part of a concerted effort by the United States to respond to Iranian influence in the region. Hereby, it can be seen that the hypothesis presented in the theoretical framework is consistent and in line with the results of the analysis that has been carried out, that Saudi Arabia made an alliance with Israel and the United States in response to the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and the dominance of Iran that threatens Arab stability.

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