

The Impact of Hamas' Military Actions Against Israel on Saudi Arabia-Israel Normalization

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Abstract: Since the onset of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia and Israel have clandestinely engaged in political and economic collaborations with the shared objective of countering Shiite organizations led by Iran. Notably, there has been a discernible shift towards normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Nevertheless, the eruption of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on October 7, 2023, has introduced a degree of ambiguity concerning the resolution of this matter and the trajectory of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. This paper aims to investigate the repercussions of the offensive initiated by Hamas on the process of normalizing Israel-Saudi relations and the responses of the international community from various perspectives. Employing a comprehensive literature review methodology, the paper will examine alterations in policy between Israel and Saudi Arabia, while utilizing data collection techniques to assess the adverse consequences and potential outcomes of the outbreak of hostilities. Moreover, this paper will innovatively delve into the role of media coverage in shaping public sentiment and influencing diplomatic decision-making. By considering political, diplomatic, and socio-cultural factors, it seeks to offer profound insights into the broader implications for regional stability and international relations within the Middle East.

Keywords: Israel, Hamas, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

As Saudi Arabia and Israel approach an agreement aimed at normalizing their diplomatic relations, the sudden and aggressive offensive by Hamas against Israel has reverberated throughout the geopolitics of the Middle East and beyond. The conflict resulted in a tragic loss of thousands of lives and further strained Israel's relations with the Islamic world. The region remains under considerable pressure from various countries and regions, and despite the involvement of extraterritorial nations, such as the United States, a resolution to this protracted conflict remains elusive. Furthermore, the influence of media, both traditional and social, significantly shapes public opinion and foreign policy decisions. This recent attack has also added a layer of complexity to the already delicate relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This paper will commence by examining the aforementioned developments and will primarily focus on assessing the repercussions of this attack on the dynamics of Saudi-Israeli relations

2. Influence

2.1. Palestinian issue and the Washington-Riyadh position

Due to the special relationship between the United States and Israel, the contact between Riyadh and Washington is meaningful at a sensitive period. Saudi Arabia maintains a steadfast position regarding the comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian issue. Crown Prince Salman has consistently voiced his concern about the Palestinian matter, emphasizing its paramount importance [1]. He has underscored the need to address this issue comprehensively, with the hope that it will ameliorate the living conditions of Palestinians and contribute to Israel's role in the Middle East [2]. Saudi Arabia has consistently adhered to the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative, stipulating that Saudi Arabia will only establish diplomatic relations with Israel once Israel withdraws its troops from Arab territories, and Palestine completes its establishment [3]. While there were rumors on October 7, 2023, suggesting Saudi Arabia might halt negotiations to normalize relations with Israel (subsequently debunked), Saudi Arabia has approached the situation with prudence during this delicate period. The Kingdom has called for a simultaneous cessation of hostilities and a reduction in tensions between Palestine and Israel. Crown Prince Salman engaged in a telephone conversation with Iranian President Raisi to discuss the situation between Palestine and Israel [4].

In contrast, Prime Minister Netanyahu is resolute in not compromising on the Palestinian issue. Several months ago, his approval ratings were sluggish due to a judicial amendment incident [5]. However, after Hamas initiated an armed offensive, his position was fortified. On October 11, Netanyahu, along with opposition leaders, issued a joint statement to establish a war cabinet, prioritizing national unity over domestic disputes and election matters in response to the ongoing conflict [6]. The release of numerous images depicting Israeli casualties suggests the potential emergence of a more right-leaning government with a tougher stance on the Palestinian question following the conflict.

2.2. Pressure from Israel and the decisions of Biden administration

The Biden administration may entertain the terms presented by Saudi Arabia and potentially extend more significant concessions in pursuit of fostering normalized relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi Arabia's concerns regarding Iran are evident, in the event of Iran acquiring nuclear weaponry, Saudi Arabia will embark on a similar nuclear armament path [7]. Although both nations engaged in diplomatic negotiations mediated by China in Beijing in March 2023, ultimately reestablishing diplomatic ties, the United States may find itself inclined to accept Saudi Arabia's conditions concerning the military industry as a means to preserve its influence within the Middle East. Notably, in August, Saudi Arabia explored the possibility of involving Chinese nuclear industry firms in the development of nuclear power facilities, a move that raised concerns in Washington. To counter the proliferation of China's influence, including its nuclear technology, the United States is likely to consider making concessions. These may include providing Saudi Arabia with cutting-edge American military equipment and extending support for Saudi Arabia's civilian nuclear program.

Relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia have shown signs of amelioration, as both nations share a common enemy: Iran. Israel is currently confronting a high-intensity military threat from radical Islamic armed groups, leaving minimal bandwidth to address Saudi Arabia's nuclear program. The eventual outcome may involve Saudi Arabia emerging as the ultimate beneficiary.

2.3. Role of media reporting in shaping public opinion and influencing foreign policy

The media played a significant role in shaping public opinion during this conflict. In contrast to previous Middle East wars, many countries in the Islamic world exercised restraint, with only a few

regimes providing military assistance to Hamas. However, outside the Islamic world, particularly among Israel's allies, the images and videos disseminated by various media outlets led to unprecedented polarization of public opinion. Before Israeli forces initiated the bombings in Gaza, opinion polls indicated that 52% of Americans held a favorable view of Palestine, while 42% had a positive view of both Israel and Palestine. However, according to Figure 1 [8], a significant divide existed between Democrats and Republicans. Additionally, social media platforms, including Tiktok, extensively reported on the indiscriminate airstrikes by the Israeli army in Gaza, revealing numerous graphic images and videos that offered a new perspective on the conflict. Notably, the BBC refrained from using the term "terrorists" to describe Hamas at the start of the conflict, despite official recognition of Hamas as a terrorist organization by various countries. This decision caused dissatisfaction within the British government and Israel, but the BBC maintained its stance, with reporter John Simpson emphasizing their role in presenting facts to the audience, rather than advocating for a particular viewpoint [9]. The dissemination of these images and videos significantly influenced public opinion, leading to large-scale pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel demonstrations in the United States and Europe, with even some Jewish individuals participating in demonstrations calling for a ceasefire [10].

The widespread public disapproval has placed Israel in a precarious position. While the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is deeply entrenched in history, individuals tend to exhibit a psychological inclination to sympathize with the party they perceive as weaker. The assault on the al-Ahli Arab Hospital intensified the censure directed at Israel, reaching unprecedented levels. As of October 24, the orchestrator behind this assault remains undisclosed. Nevertheless, the United States, a staunch ally of Israel, experienced repercussions stemming from this incident, leading to policy adjustments. Notably, the summit involving Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, and the U.S. were unilaterally canceled, prompting President Biden to return promptly to the United States [11]. Furthermore, the United States' proposal for a "safe passage" was met with rejection by Egypt and Jordan [12]. In response to the escalating conflict, Iran's Foreign Minister has issued a call for Muslim nations to enforce sanctions against Israel, encompassing measures such as an oil embargo, the expulsion of all Israeli ambassadors, and the establishment of a consortium of Islamic legal experts to pursue allegations of war crimes committed by Israel [13].

Plurality of Americans view both Israeli and Palestinian people favorably

% of U.S. adults who view ...

	Both Israeli and Palestinian people favorably	Israeli people favorably, Palestinian people unfavorably	Israeli people unfavorably, Palestinian people favorably	Both Israeli and Palestinian people unfavorably
	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	42	25	10	15
Republican/lean Rep.	34	44	3	11
Democrat/lean Dem.	48	12	16	17
Ages 18-29	45	11	17	19
30-49	44	21	11	17
50-64	38	30	7	16
65+	41	37	6	8
Protestant	40	33	5	12
White evangelical	35	50	2	5
White, not evangelical	41	28	5	13
Black Protestant	45	12	8	24
Catholic	39	27	11	14
Religiously unaffiliated	45	13	14	20
Atheist/agnostic	44	17	21	15
Nothing in particular	46	10	10	23

Note: Those who did not answer either of the two questions are not shown (9% of U.S. adults).
 Source: Survey conducted March 7-13, 2022, among U.S. adults.
 "Modest Warming in U.S. Views on Israel and Palestinians"

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Figure 1: Plurality of Americans view both Israeli and Palestinian people favorably (percentage of U.S. adults who view...) [8]

2.4. Saudi-Israeli normalization and its affection on world strategic dynamics

As previously discussed, the recent offensive by Hamas has significantly impeded the progress towards normalizing relations between Israel and Islamic nations. In the short term, it is unlikely that any new diplomatic ties will be established between Israel and Islamic countries. However, this conflict may exacerbate divisions within the Islamic world. The legitimacy of Hamas's military actions has come under scrutiny by certain Islamic nations due to the high casualty rates. As of October 11, the major Islamic countries openly supporting Hamas's military actions include Iran, Qatar, Kuwait, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi armed forces in Yemen, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Notably, Egypt has taken measures to seal its borders as it used to act, preventing Gaza refugees from entering the Sinai Peninsula [14]. Most other Islamic nations express nominal sympathy for the Palestinian cause and advocate for de-escalation of hostilities and peace negotiations. This situation has resulted in Israel facing less external pressure compared to previous conflicts in the Middle East over the past few decades. The potential for external intervention and mediation in the Middle East is now within the purview of both the United States and China, as they seek to compete for influence in the region.

Hamas's incursion not only had an unforeseeable adverse impact on the Middle East's regional landscape but also led to repercussions that extended to various global regions. One significant consequence was the resurgence of terrorism. On October 13, a school in northern France fell victim to an attack perpetrated by Islamic extremists, resulting in numerous casualties [15]. Furthermore, prominent landmarks such as the Louvre and the Palace of Versailles faced looming threats from acts of terrorism. Simultaneously, a branch of the terrorist organization "Daesh" initiated an assault on a mosque in northern Afghanistan on the same day, leading to a significant loss of life. Hamas's extreme tactics in armed assaults have served as an ominous model for other terrorist organizations. Regrettably, it appears that the world must brace itself for a heightened wave of counterterrorism efforts in the foreseeable future. The international community usually pays close attention to the development of such conflicts and takes measures to deal with possible threats.

3. Discussion

The Israel Defense Forces have mobilized a significant force of 400,000 personnel with the intention of launching a ground operation in the Gaza Strip with the aim of eradicating Hamas. This robust military response may be attributed to the high number of civilian casualties and the initial performance challenges faced by the Israeli military in the early stages of the conflict. The last time Israel experienced such significant casualties was during the Yom Kippur War. In previous conflicts in the Middle East, the Israeli army has maintained a high exchange ratio when confronting Arab coalition forces. Recent Hamas attacks have predominantly targeted Israeli civilians. The Israeli Defense Forces were ill-prepared for the conflict, leading to the capture of senior commanders [16]. In contrast, Hamas had been preparing for this operation over several years, adapting and repurposing civilian tools with limited resources. Notably, Hamas militants used civilian gliders to access underground water pipes [17], which were then converted into cannons. Israel, under the mediation of the United States, postponed its ground offensive and demanded Hamas's surrender [18]. It's crucial to acknowledge that Gaza has an extraordinarily high population density, with 42,059 people per square mile [19], and Hamas has constructed intricate underground tunnels [20]. The launch of an Israeli ground operation is anticipated to have severe humanitarian consequences. Attacking complex tunnels will cause huge casualties to the Israeli army. In the Battle of Iwo Jima, the Japanese army relied on its huge underground tunnel system to conceal the specific deployment of troop mobilization. When all beachheads were lost, the Japanese used tunnels to carry out long-lasting resistance and kill a large number of U.S. troops. The Israeli army is more likely to adopt less efficient but less damaging

tactics: grid segmenting the war zone and then using drones and artificial intelligence technology to detect tunnel entrances and seal the holes.

The most adverse scenario would entail the initiation of a ground offensive by the Israeli army, with Hamas utilizing its underground tunnels to mount a resilient defense. This engagement in street-level combat is likely to result in significant casualties. Additionally, the civilian population trapped in Gaza faces imminent threats, including water and power shortages, as well as the risk of airstrikes by the Israeli military if evacuation becomes unfeasible. Extensive civilian casualties have the potential to significantly undermine the prospects of reconciliation between Israel and Arab nations. Israel's security landscape may regress to a state reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s, and endeavors aimed at fostering diplomatic relations with Arab countries may prove futile. In this scenario, to secure its vested interests within the Middle Eastern region, the United States is poised to deploy additional and more potent military forces to provide protection for the State of Israel, which is anticipated to catalyze the alignment of China and Russia with various Arab nations, culminating in an expansive and consequential strategic confrontation with the United States.

4. Conclusion

Hamas's sudden attack on Israel is a significant event in 21st-century Middle East history. The high casualties on both sides signal the failure of reconciliation between Palestine and Israel before the mid-century mark. It also indicates a setback in Israel's relationship with Saudi Arabia during its transformation process. The neglect of Palestinian refugees by Arab countries, coupled with the imminent Israeli ground offensive, could lead to the most significant humanitarian crisis since the Covid-19 pandemic. The modern media's dissemination of war information transcends ideological and religious boundaries, influencing global public opinion and national policies. The risk of geopolitical crises and world conflicts persists, emphasizing the need for a more rational approach to international relations.

In the aftermath of the 21st century, the involvement of foreign powers frequently necessitates a protracted duration to attain enduring outcomes when confronted with intricate factors, notably historical and religious complexities. Human ethical principles prove to be particularly delicate in the context of ethnic and religious disputes. The principal impediment to the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia lies in the shared convictions of Palestinians and Saudi Arabians. Consequently, it would require a substantial period to establish diplomatic relations between these two nations, even under the most favorable conditions.

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