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**RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL
IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BALANCE OF POWER
THEORY**

Abstract: Over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Although they are attempting to keep their relationship secret, there is substantial evidence of their cooperation and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. How can formerly hostile countries get closer? According to the balance of power theory, states can forge alliances against one potential stronger power. In this case, both countries have shared concerns in the region, Turkey and Iran particularly. Hence, their newly emerged cooperation is meant to neutralize common threats, and the theory of the balance of power could explain Saudi Arabia's and Israel's recent rapprochement.

Keywords: *balance of power, Saudi Arabia, Israel, rapprochement, Iran, Turkey.*

Introduction

There are many cases when states refuse to recognize other states or establish diplomatic relations with them conditioned by various reasons. Among these, Saudi Arabia's and Israel's case stands out with its uniqueness. Being in different ideological, political, and religious milieus, they have begun to cooperate in interesting ways in recent years. On the one side is Saudi Arabia - the birthplace of Islam, where the holiest sites for Muslims, Mecca and Medina, are located. On the other side is Israel, with its newly proclaimed capital city Jerusalem, which is considered holy not only for Jews and Christians but also for Muslims. Additionally, there is a vast chasm between them concerning the Palestinian issue and Jerusalem, and the absence of diplomatic relations rounds out all these disagreements. However, despite having a plethora of religious and political issues, the last few years have been marked by clandestine and behind-the-scenes cooperation between these two countries against regional enemies.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have always stood out with their hostility and distrust since the emergence of the State of Israel. The position that Saudi Arabia occupied at the very beginning was conditioned by the Hashemite family's threat and its possible alliance with the founders of the State of Israel. Furthermore, Arab-Israeli affairs and the later Palestinian conflict also played a role in these complicated

relations. However, despite the vividly expressed animosity, it is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia's involvement in the wars was rather limited, unlike other Arab countries.

Nevertheless, starting in the 1980s, things have gradually changed, and the Kingdom's policy has shifted to the peace processes proposed by the kings of Saudi Arabia. Particularly, starting from the 1980s, Saudi Arabia adopted a relatively moderate policy towards Israel, taking into consideration the imperatives of national security. Though these peace processes were a harbinger of drastic changes, the turning point of the relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia occurred in 2006, when Iran's role in the region drastically increased. Notably, Saudi Arabia had serious concerns about Iran's nuclear project. Iran's expanded influence was perceived as a threat by Israel as well.

Consequently, Iran's expansion and aggressive politics were perceived as a threat by both Saudi Arabia and Israel, which brought together these two countries in terms of trying to contain Iran's influence in the region. After identifying the common regional challenger, these two countries came up with pragmatic approaches and regarded each other as potential allies. This rapprochement started in 2006 and manifested in frequent meetings, mutual visits, and agreements, despite the absence of diplomatic relations.

Furthermore, this article has identified another regional challenger pushing the two countries together: Turkey. Turkey's political aspirations appeared after the Arab Spring. Aiming to fill the political and leadership vacuum resulting from the Arab Spring, Turkey tried to fulfill its regional hegemonic ambitions. Henceforth, this was another impetus for the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, the paramount goal of these cordial relations was to counter Iran and Turkey and eradicate their hegemonic aspirations in the Arab World and the Middle East in general. In order to depict this picture theoretically, the balance of power theory was applied. Notably, this article seeks to understand whether the theory put forth applies to this case. To this end, the crux of the theory mentioned above is comprehensively examined and discussed. However, before the theoretical section, the historical background is provided in order to better understand the dynamics of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. To understand the rapprochement process per se, this study reveals the main reasons that pushed the two countries closer. To have a profound understanding of the case and its connection to the theory at hand and to

have a more robust analysis and holistic picture, the bilateral relations are analyzed one by one.

Historical Background **Saudi Arabia-Israel relations**

In 1902, the young Emir Abd Al-Aziz (Ibn Saud) seized Riyadh and took control over the neighboring territories. He is the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which bears his kin name, Ibn Saud.¹ On September 18, 1932, Ibn Saud issued a decree according to which the parts of the Arabian Kingdom were merged, and the name of the new state was proclaimed as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.² Saudi Arabia entered a new era after discovering oil in the late 1930s. Its impact and might were particularly felt in the 1940s. Henceforth, oil became the most powerful factor in strengthening the Kingdom's international position, improving its financial condition, and developing its society.³

Al-Zirikli, an official in the Foreign Ministry of Saudi Arabia, has published a secret document that sheds light on the Kingdom's foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This document came from King Ibn Saud, which contains instructions on the matters of foreign affairs addressed to Crown Prince Saud before his important visit to the United States in 1947.⁴ According to the document, the Crown Prince had been instructed to persuade US President Harry S. Truman that "Saudi Arabia's been satisfied with the fact that the US has given up the isolationist policies it adhered to earlier and the kingdom's great hopes caused by active US involvement in Middle East politics."⁵ He should demonstrate the importance of Saudi-American relations and emphasize the existing divergence between the Kingdom and Great Britain. The document contains a clause dedicated to the country's attitude towards Zionism. It demonstrated the deep roots of Saudi-Israeli hostile relations. The clause started with the sentence, "We, the Arabs, are Muslims first of all. The Jews have been the enemies of our religion since the birth of Islam... We do not oppose the Jews just because they are Jews. We

¹ Gertrude Bell, *Arab War: Reports Reprinted from the Secret "Arab Bulletin"* (Selwa Press, 2012).

² Iosif Levin, *The Constitutions of the States of the Near and Middle East* (Moscow, 1956), 436-437.

³ Tyler Priest, "The Dilemmas of Oil Empire," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1, (2012): 236-251.

⁴ Laurent Murawiec and George Holoch, *Princes of darkness: The Saudi assault on the West* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

⁵ Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 699.

oppose the tyrannical policy and principles preached by some Zionist Jews. Zionism claims that it is based on the liberation of oppressed Jews. How can one get rid of oppression by oppressing others, or eliminate injustice by committing a greater injustice?"⁶ Thus, the Saudis believed that Zionism posed a serious threat from both strategic and military viewpoints.

Tensions between Jews and Arab Muslims have always existed and date back to ancient times. New hostilities emerged between these two in the wake of the official proclamation of the State of Israel by the executive of the Jewish Agency David Ben-Gurion on May 14, 1948.⁷ "After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and the restoration in it of their political freedom... Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland... In the year 5657 (1897), Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress, proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country and to rebuild its National Home. This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which".⁸

However, like the other Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon), Saudi Arabia also did not recognize the newly created state in the heart of the Arab World. Saudi Arabia's anti-Zionist campaign had deep roots and went back to King ibn Saud's struggle with the Hashemite family led by Sharif Hussein of Mecca. The Saudi king thought that the Zionists, who had migrated and settled in Palestine, could ally with the Hashemites and help them unite Palestine in their large state, even further strengthening their power. Additionally, the Saudis were strictly opposed to creating the Jewish state in the territories of Palestine and the fact that they could be mixed with Arabs.⁹

Nevertheless, in spite of the harsh condemnation of the Jewish presence in Palestine, Saudi involvement in the Arab-Israel long-lasting conflict was quite slow, and their willingness to directly confront Israel

⁶Murawiec and Holoch, *Princes of darkness: The Saudi assault on the West*, 186.

⁷Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel*, May 14, 1948, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Peace/Guide/Pages/Declaration%20of%20Establishment%20of%20State%20of%20Israel.aspx>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jacob Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel: the national security imperatives," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 3 (2019): 1–17.

was rather limited.¹⁰ In May 1948, Riyadh sent a modest number of weapons, soldiers, aircraft, and no more than a handful of untrained tribesmen riding camels to the battlefield.¹¹¹²

However, the Six-Day War in 1967 was a turning point in Saudi Arabia's active involvement in the conflict. Since then, Saudi Arabia has actively formulated the Arab strategy towards Israel and became a regional conflict mediator.¹³ Several major developments conditioned this. First, Israel occupied the eastern part of Jerusalem, which meant that the Al-Aqsa Mosque (the third holiest site in Islam) was no longer under Muslim control. Second, the war caused the end of the era of President Nasser of Egypt. Third, the emergence of oil as a new factor in shifting the balance of power in the region. The last point in particular assured Saudi's ability to have a decisive impact on the conflict. It was realized in the form of an oil embargo on the United States and other countries in 1973 as a response to their support and financial aid to Israel during the war.¹⁴ The hostility between Israel and Saudi Arabia continued in the 1970s as well. The ice melted, and a real thaw in relations occurred in the early 1980s when Crown Prince Fahd proposed a peace initiative in 1981, which outlined a framework for a comprehensive peace between the conflicting sides.

The Fahd Initiative became an Arab program for peace through the Arab League¹⁵: "This new phase of expanded Israeli–Saudi engagement continued throughout the 1990s. In 1991, Saudi Arabia proved responsive to Washington's demands at the Madrid Conference and agreed to join Arab–Israeli working groups on water, environmental protection, economic cooperation, refugees, and arms control. By the time the Oslo I Accords were concluded in 1993, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies opted to moderate their traditional policy of boycotting Israel".¹⁶ In the 2000s, conditioned by 9/11, in which fifteen citizens of

¹⁰ Marta Furlan, "Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 13, no. 2, (2019): 1–15.

¹¹ Alexander Bligh, "Toward Israeli–Saudi Coexistence," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 35, (1985): 24–47.

¹² Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

¹³ Jonathan Adelman, *The rise of Israel: A history of a revolutionary state* (London: Routledge, 2008), 73–91.

¹⁴ Abadi, *Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel: the national security imperatives*, 1–17.

¹⁵ Joseph Kostiner, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab–Israeli Peace Process: The Fluctuation of Regional Coordination," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3, (2009): 417–429.

¹⁶ Furlan, *Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?* 2.

Saudi Arabia were involved, Saudi Arabia's image was severely tarnished in the international arena, which, in its turn, caused a deterioration of the Kingdom's relations with the United States. In order to defuse the tension and improve the situation, Crown Prince Abdullah came up with another comprehensive peace plan between the two sides in 2002, as a friendly gesture toward Israel. Particularly, "it did not mention the refugee problem and did not mandate Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders".¹⁷ However, this one was also doomed to failure as Israel again rejected it. Inconsistent relations continued till 2006 when they both were confronted by the Iranian nuclear threat.

Contextualizing the balance of power theory

The balance of power theory has played a crucial role in the thinking of IR, as it is considered one of the oldest, most fundamental and enduring theories of IR.¹⁸¹⁹ The role of the balance of power in IR was extensively applied by the prominent international relations theorist Henry Kissinger. He believed that this theory is the best guarantee for peace among states.²⁰ Some political scientists and scholars of IR claim that the theory of balance of power has different, sometimes vague, sometimes contradictory meanings. Most notably, Hans Morgenthau, a prominent exponent of the balance of power theory, in his famous book, "Politics among Nations", suggested four different definitions of the balance of power: "i. an approximately equal distribution of power internationally, ii. a policy aimed at bringing about certain power distribution, iii. a term describing any distribution of political power in international relations, iv. a description of any actual state of affairs in international politics."²¹ Philipp W. Schroeder also found several diverse meanings for a balance of power: "i. an even or balanced distribution of power, ii. any existing distribution of power, iii. any existing general situation or status quo, with no particular regard to power relations, iv. stability, peace, and repose, v. the rule of law and guaranteed rights, vi. Hegemony."²² These two approaches allow us to suggest that they both

¹⁷ Elie Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative, 2002-2014: A Plausible Missed Opportunity," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4, (2014): 590.

¹⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

¹⁹ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

²¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 125.

²² Paul W. Schroeder, "The nineteenth century system: balance of power or political equilibrium?" *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2, (1989): 137.

believe that balance of power, on the whole, is to prevent any state to gain or achieve universal hegemony.

Morgenthau identifies four methods of implementing the balancing process. The first one is 'divide and rule.' The crux of it is to divide states, the power into several parts in order to maintain their weakness. As separate units, they would have less power than they would if united.²³ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, one of the contributors to the theory, believes that the essence of this method is to maintain a hierarchy, rather than create it.²⁴

The second method is 'compensation.' Morgenthau explains that in the eighteen and nineteen centuries, territorial compensation for preserving the balance of power, which was disturbed because of another country's territorial aspirations, was a common thing.

The third method is about 'armaments,' in particular arms races between nations when one state increases its armaments and the other one tries to not only keep up with it but also exceed the latter. Albert Pollard believes that undoubtedly the balance of power stimulates the demand for arms, which primarily benefits arms dealers.²⁵ Morgenthau calls this continuous arms race and increase of military preparations "unstable, the dynamic balance of power."²⁶

The fourth method of carrying on the balancing process is through alliances. Morgenthau defines this as the most important manifestation of the balance of power. In turn, Randall Schweller defines balancing as "...the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or the political and military domination of the state by a foreign power or coalition."²⁷ Morgenthau singles out two possible ways to forge an alliance: i. alliance vs. world domination (an alliance against one potential stronger power, which strives to achieve universal dominance), ii. alliance vs. counter alliance (where one or both have imperialistic aspirations).²⁸ The classic example of this is the rival alliances of the twentieth century, most particularly the Entente and Triple Alliance.

In this context, Stephen Walt mentions that when states enter an alliance, they have two options: to balance or bandwagon. According to

²³Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*.

²⁴ Victoria T. Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁵ Albert F. Pollard, "The Balance of Power," *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs* 2, no. 2, (1923): 21-64.

²⁶Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, 136.

²⁷ Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9.

²⁸Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*.

Walt, balancing is about allying in opposition to the potential conqueror. Meanwhile, bandwagoning means to ally with the state that poses the principal source of danger.²⁹ Similarly, Schweller notes that “the aim of balancing is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed, while the goal of bandwagoning is usually self-extension.”³⁰ Walt then claims that states join alliances for two reasons. First, states strive to refrain from domination by much stronger countries. Second, states prefer to join the vulnerable rather than the stronger side, aiming at preserving their influence instead of reducing it by joining the stronger side.³¹ In addition to Walt’s arguments, Kenneth Waltz says, “Secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking.”³²

Rapprochement process: Coping with the Iranian ascendancy

The Second Lebanon War in 2006 was a turning point in the relations of Israel and Saudi Arabia. The war was a clear manifestation of the increased influence of Iran in the region. Moreover, Iran’s support of Hamas and its indirect involvement in the conflict made Saudi Arabia consider Iran a real threat to its hegemony in the Middle East. As for Israel, it was mostly concerned about Iran’s nuclear project. Furthermore, this last point was concerning for both countries. Thus, these two saw each other as potential allies, regarding Iran as a common threat.

Frederic Wehrey et al. claim that the surprising cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia has been marked by a positive development, which is the increased and noticeable pragmatism in Arab diplomacy.³³ Notably, in support of his observation he has cited an Egyptian scholar’s statement “The old Pan-Arab discourse of ‘rejection’ and ‘confrontation’ has shifted toward the vocabulary of ‘engagement’: engagement with Israel in order to contain Iran”.³⁴

²⁹ Stephan M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power. *International Security*,” 9, no. 4, (1985).

³⁰ Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1, (1994): 74.

³¹ Walt, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power. International Security*.

³² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 127.

³³ Frederic Wehrey et al. “Contention on the Periphery: Saudi-Iranian Relations and the Conflicts in Lebanon and Palestine” in *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 77-91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

Moreover, Gawdat Bahgat notes that even Israel, which was always concerned about the close relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States in regard to the latter's supply of armaments to the Kingdom, did not consider Saudi Arabia as its number one enemy. Meanwhile, Iran ranked higher on the Israeli list of enemies in the 2000s.³⁵ In addition to Bahgat, David Houska notes that Israelis were convinced that their number one enemy at that time was Iran rather than Saudi Arabia, and they were much less concerned about the U.S. supply of weapons to the Saudis in 2007.³⁶ Furthermore, Houska also mentions Likud Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's position. Notably, he told the Israeli Cabinet, "We understand the need of the United States to support the Arab moderate states, and there is a need for a united front between the U.S. and us regarding Iran."³⁷

Similarly, Michael Sugrue indicates that the Israelis understand the need of the U.S. to support Saudi Arabia as long as it does not harm Israel's security interests.³⁸ Moreover, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned in her book another manifestation of Israel's pragmatic approach towards Saudi Arabia, taking into consideration the real threat to their political interests in the Middle East coming from Iran. Notably, she noted that in May 2009, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his willingness to revive the peace process with King Abdallah.³⁹

Discussing two schools of thought in Israel that have varying interpretations of the Iranian nuclear threat, Reuven Pedatzur has cited Shimon Peres's statement, "We ought to put constant and determined efforts to settle our affairs ... because Iran is a greater danger for the Arabs and the Israelis".⁴⁰ Notably, Pedatzur reasons that if Iran continues developing its nuclear program, it is highly possible that a Middle Eastern model of MAD (mutually assured destruction) will be implemented in the region, meaning more cooperation between Israel and Middle Eastern

³⁵Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 3, (2006): 421-443.

³⁶David Houska, "U.S. Plans Major Middle East Arms Sales," *Arms Control Today* 37, no. 7, (September 2007).

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Michael Sugrue, "Saudi Deal Moves Forward," *Arms Control Today* 40, no. 10, (2010).

³⁹ Hillary R. Clinton, *Hard Choices*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

⁴⁰Reuven Pedatzur, "The Iranian Nuclear Threat and the Israeli Options," *Contemporary Security Policy* 28, no. 3 (2007): 516.

countries. However, it needs to be highlighted that he did not single out Saudi Arabia among the Middle Eastern countries.⁴¹

Though most scholars think that cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia will lead to rapprochement, Abadi claims otherwise. Particularly, he argues that although both sides realize the necessity of forming an alliance against the Iranian nuclear threat, the Palestinian issue is a central obstacle in the normalization process.⁴² Ivanov also emphasizes the fact that the Palestinian issue will continue to be a major stumbling block for the Kingdom and Israel to normalize their relations. However, due to the common concern, there are sentiments of rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, aimed at countering Iran in the region.⁴³ He mentions that according to unofficial sources, Riyadh was ready to provide Israel With “an air corridor, air bases for rescue helicopters, drones, and other armaments” if Israel decided to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁴⁴ Though this information was not confirmed officially, moreover it was formally denied, there is still enough evidence that shows that even in the absence of diplomatic relations, representatives of both sides unofficially contacted each other. However, he argues that it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will normalize its relations with Israel until the issue between the latter and Palestine is resolved.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the common thread in these scholars’ works is that Iran poses a real threat to both Saudi Arabia and Israel and that the threat is so crucial for them that it makes them put aside all existing issues and cooperate to eliminate the common threat.

Turkey’s geopolitical ascendancy

Turkey’s cordial relations with Israel go back to 1949 when Turkey was among the first Muslim countries that recognized the State of Israel.⁴⁶ Umut Uzer has analyzed Turkish-Israeli relations’ dynamics since the establishment of the State of Israel. He claims that overall they have had cordial relations. Moreover, the 1990s were considered a golden

⁴¹ Ibid., 513-541.

⁴² Abadi, *Saudi Arabia’s rapprochement with Israel: the national security imperatives*.

⁴³ Stanislav Ivanov, “The Alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia,” *New Eastern Outlook*, September 15, 2015, <https://journal-neo.org/2015/09/15/the-alliance-between-israel-and-saudi-arabia/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Umut Uzer, “Turkish-Israeli Relations: Their Rise and Fall,” *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2013): 97–110.

age in Turkish-Israeli relations.⁴⁷ Similarly, Ofra Bengio and Gencer Özcan describe the Turkish-Israeli alignment in the 1990s in detail. Notably, they talk about military cooperation that puts bilateral relations on a new level. They claim that this alignment was unique per se, as it brought together a Muslim and a Jewish state: a rare phenomenon in modern history.⁴⁸ Jacob Abadi argues that Turkey's aspiration to maintain cordial relations with Israel was largely conditioned by the latter's alignment with the West. It was not a secret that Turkey was conducting pro-Western policy at that time, aiming at gaining full membership in NATO.⁴⁹ Continuing Abadi's argument about Turkey's inclination towards the West, Yavuz assures us that besides that fact, Atatürk's promotion of secularism also made the alignment between these two states more than possible. Another significant impetus in the deepening of cordial relations was the perception of common threats in Syria and Iran.⁵⁰

Abadi, in turn, analyses Turkish-Israeli relations from Israel's perspective. He says that Israel has always sought to establish strong relations with the so-called 'periphery' states, referring to Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia, as they were located on the periphery of the Middle East. Through this peripheral diplomacy, Israel tried to avoid isolation, because being situated in the heart of the Arab world, with whom Israel was fiercely fighting over the Palestinian issue as well as others, Israel was surrounded by hostile nations.⁵¹

However, with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s, Turkey's attitude towards Israel has changed, as the former's domestic and foreign policy also has changed.⁵² Mohammed Alsaftawi claims that a number of events that took place in the 2000s, like the offensive against Hamas, Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009, and Mavi Marmara in 2010 resulted in the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.⁵³ He states that further deterioration of relations

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ofra Bengio, Özcan Gencer, "Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and Its Alignment with Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 2, (2001): 50-92.

⁴⁹ Jacob Abadi, "Israel and Turkey: From Covert to Overt Relations," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 15, no. 2, (1995): 1-16.

⁵⁰ Hakan M. Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli Relations Through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 1, (1997): 22-37.

⁵¹ Jacob Abadi, *Israel's quest for recognition and acceptance in Asia: Garrison state diplomacy*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 3-28.

⁵² Uzer, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: Their Rise and Fall."

⁵³ Mohammed Alsaftawi, "Turkish policy towards Israel and Palestine: Continuity and change in the relations of the Turkish-Palestinian-Israeli triangle under the rule of the

was during the Arab Spring, where Turkey, particularly its government headed by the AKP party, had taken a dynamic role. Notably, the latter attempted to enhance relations with the Palestinian Authority based on both its domestic and foreign interests. That increased role in the Palestinian issue vexed Israel, as Turkey began to actively promote Palestinian statehood in the international arena.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Konstantinos Zarras, analyzing Turkish-Saudi relations during and particularly after the Arab Spring, argues that Saudi Arabia's divergence with Turkey also started during the Arab Spring.⁵⁵ He claims that though they had common interests in the stabilization of the region and both supported the rebel forces of Syria (Syria has had very cordial relations with Iran – the Kingdom's main enemy and has been considered Iran's key ally. Hence, Saudi Arabia thought that regime change in Syria would bring a Sunni-dominated government into power which, in turn, would definitely be in its interests.⁵⁶ However, they had other disagreements. Notably, Zarras mentions that Turkey's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood were unacceptable for Saudi Arabia, as the latter has designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Moreover, unlike Israel and the West, Turkey had a much more flexible attitude towards Iran and its nuclear program. This fact also strained Turkish-Saudi relations any further.

According to Elizabeth Monier, the crux of the matter was that as a result of the Arab Spring, a political and leadership vacuum emerged in the Middle East after the fall of Libya's, Egypt's, Yemen's and Tunisia's presidents, and Assad facing the outbreak of a full-scale civil war in Syria. Therefore, Turkey attempted to fill that vacuum, seeking regional hegemony and trying to increase its influence in the Arab World.⁵⁷ Moreover, Orna Almog and Ayşegül Sever point out that Turkey's aspirations to obtain a leading regional role were also conditioned by its growing soft power in the Arab world.⁵⁸ In addition to discussing

Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002-2016) (Doctoral diss., Gent University, 2017), 207-239.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Konstantinos Zarras, "Assessing the Regional Influence and Relations of Turkey and Saudi Arabia After the Arab Spring," in *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters After the Arab Spring*, ed. Hüseyin Işıksal, Oğuzhan Göksel (Springer International Publishing AG 2018), 117-133.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East regionalism: The Arab Spring and competition for discursive hegemony between Egypt, Iran and Turkey," *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 4, (2014): 421-434.

⁵⁸ Orna Almog and Ayşegül Sever, *The Mavi Marmara: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences. Contemporary Israeli– Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 61-101.

Turkish-Israeli relations after the Mavi Marmara incident, Almog et al., like Zarras, highlights that “Ankara’s previously close relationship with Saudi Arabia became tense as a result of Turkey’s clear support for the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁵⁹ These developments, Philipp Amour reasons, were alarming for Israel, as the latter “was concerned with all these developments as a counter to the status quo.”⁶⁰ Therefore, Israel saw Saudi Arabia as a possible ally after the deterioration of relations with Turkey.

The common trait of the studied literature was that most of the authors show the dynamics of the relations between Israel and Turkey, and Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Also, although they had cordial relations or common interests, their interests eventually diverged and their relationship became strained, which pushed Saudi Arabia and Israel closer.

Shared Concerns and Interests

While Iran has been a nuclear threat to Saudi Arabia and Israel from the beginning of the 2000s, it has become more assertive since 2011, most notably since the Arab Spring.⁶¹ Marta Furlan highlights that the 2011 uprisings resulted in significant changes and challenges in the region, including the fall of several governments, the crumbling of the regional status quo, ongoing brutal internecine wars, etc. Hence, she notes, regional actors like Israel and Saudi Arabia had to adjust their policies and relations corresponding to the new situation. In this process of adjustment, they have found out that they share interests and concerns, which immensely promoted their eventual cooperation.⁶²

Oz Hassan clarifies that Saudi Arabia, being inherently conservative since its political establishment, has adopted a policy that was intended to maintain the status quo in the region, which, in turn, should be the paramount guarantee of the maintenance of its influence in the international arena, and the key safeguard of the country’s domestic stability (particularly the stability of the House of Saud).⁶³ That is why the Kingdom was concerned about the regime changes, civil wars, unrests, and revolts taking place in the Middle East, as they led to the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁰ Phillip O. Amour, “Israel, the Arab Spring, and the Unfolding Regional Order in the Middle East: A Strategic Assessment,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3, (2016): 2.

⁶¹ Furlan, *Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?*

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Oz Hassan, “Undermining the transatlantic democracy agenda? The Arab Spring and Saudi Arabia’s counteracting democracy strategy,” *Democratization*, 22, no. 3 (2015): 479–495.

deterioration of the regional status quo. The latter, he reasons, in turn, could foster anti-government movements in the country.⁶⁴

Likely, Avner Yaniv, analyzing Israel's viewpoint, mentions that it has been traditionally devoted to preserving the regional status quo, considering the latter as a guarantor of the advancement of its national interests,⁶⁵ stating that "While the fall of longstanding rulers and the rise of new political forces (especially those more inclined toward Islamism) might encourage a revived call to action against Israel and bring into question the status quo in which the Jewish State's existence has been accepted de facto by all regional actors."⁶⁶ Therefore, these developments in the region were observed with concern by Israel.

Sinem Cengiz identifies another thing that has posed a threat to the maintenance of the balance of power in the region and, consequently, has led to concern in Saudi Arabia and Israel. This was the newly emerged alliance between Turkey and Qatar and between them and Iran. At the same time, Iran has been the regional nemesis for both the Kingdom and Israel and is the number one impetus that has pushed these two closer.⁶⁷ Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner claim that these countries, supported by the Arab Spring revolutions, were eager to fill the regional power vacuum engendered by the Arab Spring.⁶⁸ Hence, the potential change of the geopolitical balance of power in the region was seen by Saudi Arabia and Israel as a serious concern.

Methodology and Research Design

This article seeks to answer the following research question:

- Is the theory of balance of power applicable to the rapprochement process between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Accordingly, the hypothesis to be tested is the following.

- Taking into consideration and comparing the past and present dynamics of the relations of the two countries, the theory of balance of power explains the rapprochement as a response to the potential threat.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Avner Yaniv, *Deterrence Without the Bomb: The Politics of Israeli Strategy*, (Lanham, 1987), 12–19.

⁶⁶ Furlan, *Israeli–Saudi Relations in a Changed and Changing Middle East: Growing Cooperation?* 6.

⁶⁷ Sinem Cengiz, "An Assessment of Turkish and Saudi Policy towards the Gulf Crisis: Three Levels of Analysis," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2019): 151–168.

⁶⁸ Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "Turkey and Qatar's Burgeoning Strategic Alliance," *Middle East Institute*, June 8, 2016 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-and-qatars-burgeoning-strategic-alliance>.

In the literature review, we identified the primary reasons that lead to the rapprochement between the two countries. In order to understand the core characteristics of the theory put forth and how it is relevant here, the analysis heavily focuses on the literature review. To answer the aforementioned question, secondary data has been collected. Besides, the explanatory research design was applied based on qualitative analysis. Available and collected qualitative data, including media articles, was also used to find out further development in the relations of Israel and Saudi Arabia. It should be highlighted that no major academic work known to the author has applied the theory of balance of power to Saudi Arabia's and Israel's rapprochement.

Forty-year-old Rivalry: Saudi Arabia – Iran

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been considered regional powers for several decades and still have their “say” in all regional issues. However, it is not a secret that their relationship has always been marked by enmity. In order to understand the essence of their forty-year-old hostility, a brief analysis of their relations after 1979 is needed.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have always been in a religious competition. However, a decisive change in Saudi-Iranian relations occurred in 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini put an end to the Iranian monarchy and founded the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result, Iran has become a Shia-ruled theocracy and challenged the Sunni Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as the leader of the Muslim world.⁶⁹ After the successful revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia plunged into crisis, as the Eastern Province of the country, heavily populated by the Shia Muslims, started uprisings. Thereby, “Khomeini endangered the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia by appealing to its disenfranchised Shi'a population in the Eastern Province.”⁷⁰ Consequently, the tension between these two countries was exacerbated. Moreover, Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for spreading revolutionary ideologies.

Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has launched proxy wars^{71*} against Iran. The first proxy war was in Iraq from 1980 to 1988. In order to hinder Iran's efforts to propagate revolutionary ideas amongst Iraq's Shia

⁶⁹ Max Fisher, “How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

⁷⁰ Frederic Wehrey et al., “Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship,” in *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 13.

^{71*} A proxy war is when a third power instigates a war between another two countries, in which the former is not involved directly.

majority, Saudi Arabia, with the support of the United States, helped Iraq throughout the war, which resulted in the weakening of Iran's regional influence.⁷² However, in 2003, when the US toppled Iraqi Sunni-led Baathist Party leader Saddam Hussein, for the first time in history, a Shiite politician became the president of Iraq. Thus, the balance of power turned in favor of Iran. This, in turn, triggered another proxy war in Lebanon in the mid-2000s. As sectarianism was highly expressed in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iran easily penetrated and even influenced the country's domestic parties and militias. In order to project and expand its influence, Iran provided significant support to Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁷³ Thereby Saudi Arabia and Iran waged "a new kind of proxy struggle, not on conventional military battlefields, but within the domestic politics of weakened institutional structures."⁷⁴ Keeping in mind their aspirations for regional hegemony, these two rivals continued to entrench and deepen sectarian divides aimed at "mobilizing supporters based on religious identity markers".⁷⁵

Saudi Arabia's and Iran's intervention in the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars is also based on sectarian ideas. Iran has supported the Houthis, a minority group within the Shi'a community, while Saudi Arabia has backed Yemen's Sunni leadership. In the case of Syria, the Kingdom has funded Sunni rebels, while Iran has supported the Syrian government.⁷⁶ However, it should be noted that waging proxy wars, aiming at gaining influence in the region, was a real threat to the regional balance of power and another reason for unending regional hegemonic rivalry because they were becoming more inclined to proxy conflicts just to hinder the other side in order to increase its influence and relative gains.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's major concern is the Iranian nuclear project (INP). Though Iran always assures that they are using nuclear technology only for the peaceful production of energy, the Kingdom regards it with suspicion. Iran started to develop nuclear programs in the 1950s, but its secret plans were revealed in the 2000s when it was found out that fuel enrichment was too high to be used for peaceful purposes.⁷⁷

⁷² Fisher, *How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East*.

⁷³Pauline Crepy, "Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry, *Flux: International Relations Review* 9, no.1 (2018): 23-35.

⁷⁴ Fisher, *How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East*.

⁷⁵Crepy, "Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," 33.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nina Mast, *The Israel Lobby and US Policy in the Middle East: The Iraq War, The Egyptian Arab Spring, and Iran's Nuclear Program*, (Carnegie Mellon University, 2014).

In 2006, the international community began joint actions in this regard, imposing bans and sanctions on various spheres of Iran.⁷⁸

As the sanctions had severely damaged Iran's economy, it decided to sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. According to this agreement, Iran was obliged to decrease its nuclear capabilities, while the international community in exchange would lift some sanctions.⁷⁹ Saudi Arabia considered this deal as a "flawed agreement," and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) declared that they would also undoubtedly develop nuclear weapons if Iran continues.⁸⁰ Tensed relations continue to the present. Once in an interview with Fox News, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the three greatest threats that Israel faces, are "Iran, Iran, and Iran."⁸¹

Overall, Saudi Arabia has been at loggerheads with Iran for forty years. The Sunni Muslim Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran have been vying for regional hegemony from 1979 to the present.

Israel – Iran Relations

Throughout history, Israel and Iran's bilateral relations have depended on their national interests. However, they have been considered inherently hostile countries, although they are not neighboring countries, and consequently do not share common borders, do not ever wage war against each other, and do not have territorial disputes with each other.

During the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), Israel was considered an ally of Iran, as the latter was striving for socio-economic reforms and seeking to establish close ties with the West, most particularly with the United States. For Israel also, Iran was an ideal ally at that time, taking into account Ben-Gurion's periphery doctrine. Thus, close ties were developed between them.⁸²

⁷⁸Elissa Gootman, "Security Council Approves Sanctions Against Iran Over Nuclear Program," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/world/24nations.html>.

⁷⁹Arms Control Association, *Fact Sheets & Briefs, Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action at a Glance*, 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

⁸⁰ Yara Bayoumy, "On eve of Trump-Saudi meeting, Riyadh calls Iran nuclear deal flawed," *Reuters*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-us-trip/on-eve-of-trump-saudi-meeting-riyadh-calls-iran-nuclear-deal-flawed-idUSKBN1GV1YT>.

⁸¹ "Benjamin Netanyahu opens up about his history with America," *Fox News*, March 11, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/benjamin-netanyahu-opens-up-about-hishistory-with-america>.

⁸²Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy*, (Oxford University Press, 2018).

The period of close ties was ended abruptly by the Islamic revolution in Iran. "Iran's involvement in Lebanon and its moral, political, and logistical support for Islamist movements (Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad) made it more directly involved in the Arab–Israeli conflict."⁸³ Also, Iran's attempts to obtain weapons of mass destruction and develop its nuclear program were seen by Israel as another serious threat and challenge. Furthermore, revolutionary Iran had a tough stance on the Palestinian issue. It rejected Israel's claims that Palestine was the historical home of Jews. Revolutionaries considered Zionism to be a racist ideology.⁸⁴ They said that "the Zionist regime is a microbe that has inflicted disease on the region, and there was no solution for this pariah state, but its dismantling".⁸⁵ Hence, Israel could not have close relations with the country, which opposed its existence and repeatedly called for its destruction.

Bilateral relations witnessed a cooling after the Iran-Iraq war: "With Iraq defeated and sanctioned, Israel sees Iran as the only country left in the region with an offensive capability that can threaten Israel."⁸⁶ Additionally, in 1993, the President of Israel said that after the defeat of Iraq, Iran had become a strategic superpower which further strengthened Israel's enmity towards Iran.⁸⁷ In addition to all this, in the 2000s, "Israel depicted Iran and its quest for nuclear technology as a lethal threat to the country."⁸⁸ Notably, Israel was afraid that Iran's plans to advance its nuclear potential would deter its nuclear capacity, which is why Israel's fears and concerns in this regard deepened further.

Things became worse due to the Nuclear Deal or the JCPOA agreement with Iran, signed in mid-July, 2015. Like Saudi Arabia, Israel was also strictly opposed to the deal. The crux of the matter was that the deal would not have prevented Iran from developing its nuclear program and abolishing its nuclear resources. It would only halt the advancement for a while. However, Iran would still be able to increase its nuclear potential. Highly concerned about the agreement, Netanyahu called the deal a "historic mistake for the world."⁸⁹

⁸³ David Menashri, "Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict," *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2006): 109.

⁸⁴ Katajun Amirpur, "Iran's Policy towards Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel. Is the Present Iranian State Islamofascist?" *Die Welt Des Islams* 52 no. 3/4, (2012): 370-399.

⁸⁵ Menashri, "Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict," 111.

⁸⁶ Trita Parsi, "Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic Competition from the Power Cycle Perspective," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005): 249.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-269.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 249

⁸⁹ Associated Press, "Netanyahu Calls Iran Deal Historic Mistake," July 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRF9Uqus-tA>.

Another thing related to the deal that concerned Israel was the relief of the sanctions. Particularly, Israel was afraid that the sanctions' relief would contribute to the improvement of Iran's economy. Consequently, it would continue to support Islamist movements (Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad).⁹⁰ Furthermore, Israel feared the possibility that other Middle Eastern states could also have aspirations to develop nuclear programs. In turn, this could have promoted a nuclear arms race in the region, which would not have been easily prevented.⁹¹

To conclude, Iran, its nuclear program, and its quest for regional hegemony posed a real threat to Saudi Arabia and Israel, thereby making Iran a common enemy for both of them. Hence, this fact hugely contributed to the rapprochement between these two countries regardless of the absence of diplomatic relations.

Saudi-Turkish Relations

Bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Turkey have always been conditioned by the overall regional situation and have been affected both positively and negatively by events taking place in the Middle East.

Until the mid-1960s, these two countries did not exert any effort to develop bilateral relations due to diverging political systems and goals, foreign policies, attitudes and ideologies.⁹² Starting in the late 1960s and 1970s, when "Islam began to re-emerge as a political force in Turkey in opposition to the country's then military-dominated secular establishment" Saudi Arabia's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started to fund several Turkish Islamist organizations both in Turkey and abroad.⁹³

The rise of Islamic-based political figures in Turkey also contributed to the development of economic and political ties between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Cordial relations continued in the mid-1990s when, during the Persia Gulf War, they were on the same side against Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. However, relations took a sharp turn for the worse at the end of the 1990s "as a result of the deterioration

⁹⁰ Raphael Ahren, "Battle to thwart Iran nuke deal not over, Foreign Ministry chief vows," *The Times of Israel*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/battle-to-thwart-the-iran-nuke-deal-is-not-over-foreign-ministry-chief-vows/>.

⁹¹ Moran Azullay, "Negotiators reach historic nuclear agreement with Iran," *Ynetnews*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4679591,00.html>.

⁹² Suraj Sharma, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia: Are tensions lurking behind the smiles?" *Middle East Eye*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-and-saudi-arabia-are-tensions-lurking-behind-smiles>.

⁹³ "The Saudi-Turkish antagonism," *Strategic Comments* 25, no. 5 (2019): iv-vi.

of Turkish-Syrian relations over Syria's support to the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK).⁹⁴ Furthermore, the problems on the usage of the Euphrates river led to the stagnation of bilateral relations.⁹⁵

The year 2003 was rather challenging for the Kingdom. The US invasion of Iraq, the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the empowerment of the Iraqi Shias (and consequently Iran's hegemonic ambitions), and their active engagement in Iraq, etc. were worrisome for Saudi Arabia. Thereby, it began to build an alliance that shared its concerns. One of those states was Turkey. Thus, bilateral relations improved in 2006 when the Saudi monarch became the first Saudi leader who paid a visit to Turkey. This was followed by a second visit in 2007 and flourishing economic and high-level diplomatic ties. Cordial relations continued throughout the first decade of the 2000s.⁹⁶

Then came the Arab Spring, which resulted in the gradual but systemic deterioration of the relations between them. The crux of the matter was that Turkey, headed by President Erdogan, welcomed the revolutions in the region, while Saudi Arabia was pro-status quo. Particularly, Saudi Arabia feared that these revolts could embolden Shia Muslims and other opposition groups within the country and neighboring countries, resulting in destabilization of the balance of power in the region.⁹⁷ Disagreements heightened in 2012, when Ankara started to support Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The latter was considered a terrorist organization by the Kingdom, making Turkey's ties with them unacceptable. In 2013, as a result of a military coup, which was rigorously condemned by Erdogan, Morsi was ousted and offered shelter in Turkey. Tensions came to a peak when these two countries appeared on opposite sides during the Qatar crisis in 2017.⁹⁹

⁹⁴Meliha B. Altunisik, "Bitter Frenemies: The Not-Quite-Alliance Between Saudi Arabia And Turkey", *Foreign Affairs*, May 15, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2012-05-15/bitter-frenemies>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Nasser Pourebrahim, "Turkish-Saudi Relations: A regional Perspective (2003-2015)", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2(22), (2015): 69-92.

⁹⁷ Ahmed Al-Burai, "Why is Saudi Arabia and the UAE's antagonism of Turkey on the rise?" *Daily Sabah*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/why-is-saudi-arabia-and-the-uaes-antagonism-of-turkey-on-the-rise>.

⁹⁸ Birol Baskan, "A new Turkey-Saudi crisis is brewing," *Middle East Institute*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-turkey-saudi-crisis-brewing>.

⁹⁹ Nader Habibi, "How Turkey and Saudi Arabia became frenemies – and why the Khashoggi case could change that," *The Conversation*, October 18, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/how-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-became-frenemies-and-why-the-khashoggi-case-could-change-that-105021>.

Saudi Arabia and its allies were upset over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its ties with Iran.

Furthermore, in 2018, the mystery over the fate of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the country's consulate in Istanbul further deepened. A plethora of opinions, speculations, and accusations have appeared related to this issue from both sides. Therefore, bilateral relations have not recovered yet.¹⁰⁰

Overall, Saudi-Turkish relations stand out with ups and downs, conditioned by the events taking place in the region. However, an improvement in the current soured relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey remains very unrealistic.

Israel-Turkey Relations

For many years, Israel and Turkey have closely cooperated in the spheres of defense, tourism, intelligence and trade. Turkey's inclinations towards the West have conditioned cordial relations. Moreover, Turkey has even seen Israel as its strategic partner in the region. However, Israeli-Turkish relations have also had ups and downs.

It needs to be highlighted that the revivalism of Islam in Turkey's socio-political life has shifted relations between Israel and Turkey. In 1923, Mustafa Kemal established a secular republic. Nevertheless, contrary to the imaginary dominance of secular ideas, religion as a system of values, as a leading force in society and as a factor regulating family and interpersonal relations, has never retreated (setting aside the claims of the descendants of Atatürk on its downfall and possible defeat). Islam has always regulated Turkey's social value system in the public sphere and has always been an essential component of Turkish society. Thus, the reactivation of Islam should be seen as a rediscovery of the Turkish identity.¹⁰¹ Islamists in Turkey adamantly oppose Israel and the Jews. In this regard, Turkey's Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan once said, "To be with Israel in the same community as two allied states working for common interests is first against our being Muslims, our humanity. To be seen with Israel side by side anywhere and under any

¹⁰⁰ Carlotta Gall, "What Happened to Jamal Khashoggi? Conflicting Reports Deepen a Mystery," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/03/world/middleeast/khashoggi-saudi-journalist-istanbul.html>.

¹⁰¹ Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, *Islam in the Socio-Political Life of Turkey (Between 1970 and 2001)*, (Yerevan: Limush Press, 2008).

circumstances is a humiliation for us."¹⁰² Islamist sentiments resulted in the gradual deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations. One of the manifestations of this deterioration is the opening of a full diplomatic mission of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Turkey in 1979. Furthermore, in 1980, Ankara recalled its ambassador (as did Israel) after the military coup in Turkey. Relations on the ambassadorial level were restored only a decade ago.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, the 1990s were a golden age for Israeli-Turkish relations. The milestone of the decade was a series of military agreements signed between them, due to which these two countries became strategic partners.¹⁰⁴ But the heyday of the Israeli-Turkish relations came when the AKP took power in Turkey in 2002. Though the latter defines itself as a "conservative democratic" party, there is speculation that it has a hidden Islamic agenda.¹⁰⁵ A number of events soured and weakened bilateral relations further, particularly Operation Cast Lead, also known as the Gaza War in 2008-2009. The war began with the invasion of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the Gaza Strip and the bombardment of the Hamas government office, mostly targeting the urban population and civilian infrastructure.¹⁰⁶ The Turkish position on this issue was extremely critical. Turkey's President Erdogan was deeply embarrassed as two days prior to the operation he hosted Israel's Prime Minister in the framework of the negotiations for a peace treaty with Syria mediated by Turkey. However, Erdogan had not been informed about the pending operation.¹⁰⁷

The culmination of the decline of bilateral relations was the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 as a result of which cooperation between them broke down in all spheres with the exception of trade.¹⁰⁸ In other words, this was "the worst crisis in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations."¹⁰⁹ In May 2010, the Turkish-owned Mavi Marmara ship was attacked by

¹⁰² Necmettin Erbakan, *The Basic Problems of Turkey*, (Ankara: Rehber Yayıncılık, 1991), 89.

¹⁰³ Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli Relations Through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate."

¹⁰⁴ Bengio, Gencer, "Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and Its Alignment with Israel."

¹⁰⁵ Angel Rabasa and Stephen F. Larrabee, "The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey" in *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 31-50.

¹⁰⁶ Sergio Catignani, "Variation on a Theme: Israel's operation cast lead and the Gaza strip missile conundrum," *The RUSI Journal* 154, no. 4, (2009): 66-73.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Gwertzman, "Gaza and Strains in Israel-Turkish Relations," interview by Steven A. Cook, *CFR*, January 19, 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/gaza-and-strains-israeli-turkish-relations>.

¹⁰⁸ Uzer, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: Their Rise and Fall."

¹⁰⁹ Almog and Sever, *The Mavi Marmara: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences*, 62.

Israeli forces. As a result of the shooting, 10 Turkish activists were killed. The purpose of the flotilla was to deliver aid to Gaza.¹¹⁰ The outbreak of the Arab Spring created new challenges for the already soured relations. Turkey tried to fill the power vacuum resulting from the uprisings and fulfill its aspirations to become a leading regional power, which was unacceptable for Israel.¹¹¹

In spite of the decades-long close cooperation, Israeli-Turkish relations notably deteriorated in the 2000s because of Turkey's permanent support of Hamas, its campaigns for the international recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state and its overall commitment to the Palestinian cause. Additionally, Turkey has not recognized Hamas as a terrorist organization, unlike Israel. These events strained bilateral relations further.

“Is the enemy of my enemy my friend?”

The first substantial sign of the developing relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel can be considered the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. In this regard, the Saudi authorities came up with a critical statement, describing Hezbollah's action towards Israel as "illegitimate resistance involved in miscalculated adventure."¹¹² Moreover, shortly after the war, in 2007, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert traveled to Jordan on the request of the King, where they met with the foreign ministers of the Arab League, including Saudi Arabia's foreign minister. They discussed the possible ways of considering the Saudi Arab Peace Plan. As a result of the meeting, Olmert said: “The road remains long, and our enemies are many, but there are also first signs of developments that point to the chance that in the coming year we will manage to make progress towards resolving the conflicts with our neighbors, especially with the Palestinians.”¹¹³ It is worth mentioning once again that according to the peace initiative, the members would recognize Israel as a sovereign state. In exchange, Israel should return the territories occupied in 1967.

¹¹⁰ “Mavi Marmara: Why did Israel stop the Gaza flotilla?”, *BBC*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10203726>.

¹¹¹ Almog and Sever, *The Mavi Marmara: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences*, 61-101.

¹¹² Suzan Quitaz, “Saudi-Israeli Relations: The Emergence of a new alliance,” *The New Arab*, August 14, 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/8/14/saudi-israeli-relations-the-emergence-of-a-new-alliance>.

¹¹³ Ronny Sofer, “Olmert Hopeful of Mideast Peace,” *Ynetnews*, April 18, 2007, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3389582,00.html>.

Since then, the meetings between Israeli and Saudi high officials have become more frequent as they both recognized that Iran is a top priority threat. Iran's factor was an impetus for the rapprochement and developing relationship between these two countries. Despite the absence of diplomatic relations, since 2014, Israeli and Saudi senior officials have had a series of meetings in the Czech Republic, Italy, Switzerland, and India. For instance, in 2014, in the framework of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Israel's Justice Minister Tzipi Livni met with the former director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence agency, Prince Turki al-Faisal.¹¹⁴ Moreover, in August 2014, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Prince Al Faisal announced during the world assembly of Islamic scholars in Jeddah: "We must reject planting hatred towards Israel, and we should normalize relations with the Jewish state."¹¹⁵ In 2015, Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Dore Gold and Saudi General Anwar Majed Eshki met in Washington during the conference when the latter was presenting his plan for Middle East Regulation (MER) about the need to establish cooperation between Arab states and Israel and exert efforts to struggle against the Iranian threat.¹¹⁶ In 2016, the historic handshake between Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud was documented. That same year, the retired Saudi General Dr. Anwar Eshki, heading the delegation of Saudi business people and academics, made a historic visit to Israel.¹¹⁷ In 2018, in an interview given to *The Atlantic Magazine*, MbS stated: "There are a lot of interests we share with Israel, and if there is peace, there would be a lot of interest between Israel and the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)."¹¹⁸

This was only one part of the covert and overt meetings between these two states' senior officials. Saudi Arabia and Israel find themselves in the same boat. Both of them have had concerns about Turkey's regional aspirations, and both of them share an obsessed determination

¹¹⁴Lahav Harkov, "Saudi Prince praises Livni at Munich Security conference," *Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2014, <https://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Report-Livni-Saudi-prince-talk-peace-process-at-Munich-conference-340080>.

¹¹⁵Ivanov, "The Alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia."

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Nadav Shragai, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: It's Complicated," *Israel Hayom*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2019/07/19/israel-and-saudi-arabia-its-complicated/>.

¹¹⁸Jeffrey Goldber, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good,'" *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

when it comes to the threat posed by Iran. Hence, the preservation of the regional balance of power has become the most important driver of Saudi-Israeli relations. Here, it is worth mentioning the fourth method of carrying on the balancing process. This happens via alliances. States forge alliances to prevent political and military domination. Saudi Arabia and Israel's case of close cooperation, unlike the existing odds, can be incorporated in the method mentioned above.

Conclusion

Starting from the mid-2000s, an unprecedented change, the first signs of cooperation, were observed in the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Needless to say, throughout history, Saudi Arabia and Israel have been at odds regarding different ideological, political and religious issues. That is why their bilateral relations stand out with their hostility and rivalry. However, in recent decades the Kingdom's position towards Israel has been subjected to substantial changes. Its strategic needs conditioned the change. Particularly, it has become more moderate and pragmatic.

Thereby, the impetus for rapprochement was the shared concerns and shared interests identified by both countries, which made cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel possible.

Iran and its nuclear ambitions are considered a threat of utmost importance for both countries. Saudi Arabia and Israel are hugely concerned about Iran's expansion in the region. Moreover, the JCPOA signed between Tehran and Washington forced the authorities of Saudi Arabia to look for new allies. It has been revealed that besides the Kingdom, Israel was also strictly opposed to the deal, which was another harbinger for changes in bilateral relations.

This study has also identified another regional rival and common concern: Turkey. It has been revealed that due to Turkey's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which are qualified as terrorist organizations by the Kingdom and Israel, its hegemonic aspirations are unacceptable and worrisome for the latter two countries. This fact has also contributed to the rapprochement and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

This cooperation has been expressed by covert and overt visits, frequent meetings between Israeli and Saudi high-ranking representatives, comments and statements made on various occasions on mutual interests, and the establishment of contacts.

The research question posed at the beginning of the study aimed to reveal whether the theory of balance of power could be applicable to the rapprochement process of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Generally, four methods of implementing a balance of power were discussed, and the fourth method – forging alliances to deter or prevent military, political domination of a foreign power –is perfectly suited to Israel’s and Saudi Arabia’s case. Putting aside decades-old grievances and differences, they came together to deter Turkey’s regional ambitions and counter Iran.

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