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The Opportunities of the Normalization of Ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel for the Axis of Resistance

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Abstract

The Middle East and North Africa constitute one of the strategic and most significant regions in the world with a turbulent history. The region witnessed the birth of various countries and tense developments from the second decade of the 20th century until the middle of the century, and most of the countries in the region, including Arabic countries and Israel, emerged during the period. In this regard, the countries in the region have experienced conflicts, wars, invasions, and, sometimes, peace, in their relations with Israel. The latest development in this respect is the Saudi-led normalization of ties between some Arabic countries and Israel to oppose Iran and its axis of resistance. Though this has posed a number of threats to Iran's national security, some opportunities are evident in it, as well. Thus, the main question of the present study is what opportunities the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel can have for the empowerment of the axis of resistance. The study utilizes a descriptive and analytical methodology to answer the question, and the overall result of the study – i.e., the tested hypothesis – shows that opportunities like the creation of chasms between the government and society in Saudi Arabia, the pressure felt by Fatah and the need to reconcile with Hamas, Muslims' reaction to the negation of the Palestinian Dream by Saudis, the creation of chasms between the government and society of Israel, and the gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the region are all factors that can boost the axis of resistance based on the existence of groups who oppose the process of normalization across Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Islamic world at large.

Keywords: Normalization, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Axis of resistance, Iran

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1. Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is among the most significant regions in the world, and, keeping it under control has always been a critical pursuit for the major global powers. Thus, they have adopted diverse methods to influence the region, from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent formation of new countries to attempts aimed to get into an alliance with the countries or encourage them to form alliances with each other after World War II, and the process of the normalization of ties between Arabic countries and Israel is the latest example in this regard. Nevertheless, the countries in the region have sometimes attempted to form alliances among themselves and pursue a regionalist policy, examples of which include the alliance of Arabic countries against Israel before the normalization process or the establishment of an axis of resistance by the Islamic Republic of Iran against major global powers and some regional ones. The regionalist trend of the normalization of ties between some Arabic countries of the region led by Saudi Arabia and Israel (endorsed by the U.S.) is something that has emerged in opposition to the axis of resistance supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Though the regionalist policy of normalization poses some threats to the axis of resistance, the present study only focuses on the opportunities provided by the incident for the axis of resistance within the framework of Iran's regionalist policy. Thus, the main question of the study is as follows: "What opportunities can the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel have for the strengthening of the axis of resistance?" To answer the above question, it is hypothesized that "according to the existence of groups who oppose normalization in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Islamic world at large, opportunities like the creation of chasms between the government and society in Saudi Arabia, the pressure felt by Fatah and the need to reconcile with Hamas, Muslims' reaction to

the negation of the Palestinian Dream by Saudis, the creation of chasms between the government and society of Israel, and the gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the region can strengthen the axis of resistance". A descriptive and analytical methodology is utilized to test the hypothesis. The remaining sections of the article are organized in the following manner. After the introduction, the theoretical foundations of the study are discussed. Then, a review of the related literature is offered, and, later, the hypothesis is tested. Finally, a conclusion is provided at the end of the study.

2. A review of the related literature

In an article titled "The consequences of the normalization of ties between Arabs and Israel; consequences for the security environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2010-21), Zibae et al. (2021) argued that due to the relative and implicit compromise between the Arabs and Israel in the past and, consequently, the disclosure of the matter in 2020, it appeared that the development actualized in the form of normalization could transform the security equations of the region by overthrowing the power balance structure of the region, forming a new balance of threat process against Iran, preventing the formation of a sustainable security regime in the region, facilitating the growth of extremist groups in the region, assisting the U.S. to develop and expand its presence in the region, and establishing a post-ISIS order in the absence or Iran (Zibae & Nasri, 2021, pp. 32-62). While the strength of the article is focusing on the threats of normalization for Iran, neglecting the opportunities offered by the process is a weakness of the study, which is addressed in the present study.

In an article titled "An explanation of the relationships between Saudi Arabia and Israel to oppose Iran: 2011-2022", Navidinia (2021) stated that the Middle East underwent numerous developments in the past decade, and the fluidity of the actors' relationships with each,

including the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel, was among the most remarkable instances (Navidinia, 2021, pp. 93-110). The findings of the study showed that the above two players considered Iran a common threat and tried to oppose it by stimulating anti-Iran sentiments, supporting terrorist groups, posing challenges for Iran's regional allies, stimulating anti-Shiite sentiments, encouraging the U.S. to leave the JCPOA, and normalizing relationships with one another. Similar to the previous study, the strength of this article was its focus on the threats, while neglecting to investigate the opportunities of the normalization for the axis of resistance was its weakness.

Abbasi and Hamidfar (2020) conducted a study titled "The alliance of Saudi Arabia and Israel with the U.S. and its consequences for the power balance and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East" and concentrated on investigating the expansion and intimacy of the ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel and their strategic alliance with the U.S. and attempts to stimulate anti-Iran sentiments by strengthening an anti-Iran front in West Asia (Abbasi & Hamidfar, 2020, pp. 7-25). The strength of the study was its focus on the maintenance of stability in the region against Iran and instigating destabilizing acts to oppose the country, while paying little attention to the opportunities provided by this situation for the Islamic Republic of Iran was a weakness of the study. The latter goal is pursued in the present study.

In 2019, Zarean conducted a study titled "The impacts of the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel on the axis of resistance" (Zarean, 2019, pp. 135-162) and stated that the two countries took major steps within the preceding two years in terms of normalization, regional convergence, and strategic cooperation, and their behavior posed some threats and offered some opportunities for Iran. Though normalization is costly for Arabic countries, the tendency of Saudi

Arabia to have close ties with the Israeli regime is a result of the country's attempts to change the regional power balance to its benefit. In addition to indicating some threats, the author paid attention to some opportunities like the increased influence of the resistance discourse in the Islamic world as the only solution for the Palestinian issue, increased convergence between the axis of resistance and Palestinian resistance movements, and the rejection of the charges made against the axis of resistance concerning tribalism. The strength of the article was the balanced investigation of the threats and opportunities of normalization for the axis of resistance, while its weakness was that the study just focused on the issue of Palestine as an opportunity for the axis of resistance. The contribution of the present study is that it goes beyond the issue of Palestine.

3. Theoretical foundations: regionalism

Regionalism is a disputed idea or concept, and researchers have defined it in diverse contexts from bilateral and trilateral arrangements to multilateral cooperation among governments in a particular region (Balakrishnan, 2017, p. 19). Though the economic cooperation aspect of regionalism is highlighted at the moment, it can also involve political and security cooperation if it is viewed as a process. That is because the latter forms of cooperation quickly incorporate economic cooperation, as well. "The main drivers of regionalism are materials gains that governments expect to achieve through trading with others" (Borzel & Risse, 2016, p. 2). However, before achieving this, regionalism requires political determination to establish joint security, and this indicates the transformations the concept has undergone.

The theory of regionalism has been modified in various respects, including politics. For instance, "the transformation of geography into a non-territorial field, spirituality, multidimensionality, and democratic plurality make up the most significant theoretical transformations the concept has undergone ... new

regionalist theories are less likely to emphasize geography as the focal point of a region and regionalism, and the element does play a pivotal and determining role in them. In other words, the theories of regionalism have transformed from materialism – emphasizing material factors and elements in the process of regionalism – into spirituality based on the role of non-material and hypothetical elements and constructs” (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2009, p. 113).

Due to transformations in the sphere of power – i.e., from a bipolar international system, the collapse of the U.S.’s unipolar system, and the transition from the hierarchical state caused by the American decline – toward an international system of power balance by the emergence of major powers like China, the EU, India, and Brazil (to name but a few), “modern regionalism is shaped in within the move toward a power balance or – in the remote future – a multipolar system in which superpowers, unlike the old regions, do not direct the current from the top and outside; rather, they are guided in a somehow spontaneous manner from within and the bottom. For instance, Hatan considers politics as the driving force behind modern regionalism ... In such forms of convergence, the flexibility of countries is temporary, the results are fragile, and their real goals lack any long-term economic approaches (and are therefore short-term). Nonetheless, countries located in the regions of transcendental or hard politics and experienced the domination of political and security considerations could not take effective steps in that regard.” (Pourghahremani, 2009, p. 1).

Nevertheless, it seems that a kind of regionalism is taking shape in the regions, with identity acting as the focal point, and it looks more like the establishment of regional blocks competing with each other according to two or three identity discourses. In this regard, the movement toward an international system of power balance has been influential at a time when the major global powers are leaving less

important regions in big competition with each other and mostly spend their expenditures in their main competitions. At the same time, even in such regions, spirituality has become very influential in regionalism. In other words, common identities and identity discourses – or to put it in better terms, the inter-subjective constructions of the social construct – have superseded geography, and governments follow a policy of regionalism in such regions to maintain their security in opposition to others.

4. The normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel and its opportunities for the axis of resistance

The normalization of ties between Arabic countries (led by Saudi Arabia) and the Israeli regime is a regionalist policy intending to oppose the regionalist policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the form of the establishment of the axis of resistance. It seems that both policies seek security as the high politics and economic cooperation as the low politics.

4.1. The normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and the Israeli regime

Though the relationships between Saudi Arabia and the Israeli regime have had increasing and implicit, though feeble, relationships and cooperation, two developments have prompted them to consider the normalization of their ties since 2015: the increased influence of Iran’s axis of resistance in the region and the U.S.’s withdrawal from the region. Normalization of a relationship refers to “two countries that make their relationships with each other normal and establish friendly ties after a period of war or conflict” (Macmillan Dictionary, 2021, p. 1). In this way, normalization means the transformation of relationships between two countries from a very dark state to a condition where they cooperate with other, open their embassies in them, and exchange ambassadors. This is evident in the

developments taking place in the relationships between the Israeli regime and the UAE.

When Arabic countries experienced a heavy defeat in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Egypt, followed by Jordan, was the first Arab country that normalized its relationships with Israel in the 1970s. Though signing the Oslo Accord in 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel made Arabs hopeful about the resolution of the Palestinian issue and normalization, the Israeli regime refrained from pursuing a policy of normalization. However, after the 2006 Lebanon War, foreign policy of Israel toward the Middle East has been following two principles: normalizing ties with countries like Saudi Arabia, its Arab allies, and Turkey, and opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran and its regional allies as the most significant security challenge of the regime ... Thus, recruiting Saudi Arabia is the winning card the regime utilizes to attract other Arabic countries and normalize ties with them" (Abasi & Hamidfar, 2020, pp. 11, 15).

Though Israel had no significant achievements in this regard before the presidency of Donald Trump, the latter's withdrawal from the JCPOA, which was followed by the adoption of the Maximum Pressure Campaign against Iran and the increased influence of Iran across the region through the axis of resistance, convinced Arabic countries and Israel that they needed to normalize their ties to balance their power against Iran. In addition, this process was facilitated by the pressure exerted on them by President Trump. In this way, several Arabic countries signed the so-called Abraham Accords in the presence of the U.S. to normalize their relationships with the Israeli regime (Maleki & Mohammadzadeh Ebrahimi, 2020, p. 55), while some others have done this through distinct agreements. The countries include the UAE and Bahrain (September 15th, 2020), Morocco (December 10th, 2020), and Sudan (January 6th, 2021). It appears that some other Arabic countries are moving in the same direction, an example of

which is Saudi Arabia. The latter has kept its relationship with Israel secret so far and has not declared it official. Some Arabic countries, including Bahrain and the UAE, have even exchanged ambassadors with Israel and have opened their embassies.

The normalization of ties between Arabic countries and Israel poses multiple threats to the axis of resistance and the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, increasing the rate of threats to the axis of resistance, increasing the level of conflict due to the inability of Saudi Arabia and Israel in managing them, and accelerating the peace process across the Middle East are the three main threats posed by the normalization of ties for the axis of resistance (Zarean, 2019, p. 135). However, as many studies have considered the above threats, the present study just concentrates on the opportunities provided by the normalization process for the axis of resistance.

4.2. The opportunities of the normalization process for the axis of resistance

As pressure mounts on the Islamic Republic of Iran in an increasing manner, the country will increase its efforts to expand its influence and power in West Asia. Thus, Saudi Arabia's alignment with Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran and the axis of resistance, which has taken place to maintain a power balance against Iran, is no exception in that regard. Iran believes that keeping power under control can be carried out to exercise deterrence against its enemies, and the country's support to resistance groups to establish an axis of resistance can be interpreted in the same vein. Indeed, Iran has managed to expand its strategic depth significantly. This has resulted in a negative balance of threat in favor of the Islamic Republic in the region and has remarkably increased the costs of opposing the Islamic Revolution for the hegemonic system and its regional allies, and this has enabled the Islamic Republic to achieve deterrence

pointed out by the Supreme Leader. "Such deterrence maintains the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran in an anarchic international system" (Hassannia Moghaddam, 2020, p. 46). In this way, it appears that though the process of normalization keeps on between Arabic countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, and Israel, Iran will expand its influence over the West Asia region due to the expansion and development of the axis of resistance. The trend has taken place as predicted so far as the Islamic Republic of Iran tries to maintain an upper hand in terms of the regional power balance. Thus, it seems that, in general, the axis of resistance endeavors to neutralize the threats of neutralization and seeks to exploit the opportunities provided by this process to strengthen its regionalist policies. The opportunities provided by the normalization of ties are explained below.

4.2.1. The creation of chasms between the Saudi government and society in favor of the axis of resistance

The era of Mohammed bin Salman is an unprecedented one in terms of the increased power of the political institution and religious control. Mohammed bin Salman considers the legitimization of his policies by the religious institution a criterion for his interaction with it to have a monopoly over power and move toward the establishment of a personal authoritarian system. On this basis, any opposition to Bin Salman's policies and plans from the official religious institution or religious figures is suppressed in an unprecedented manner. One instance is passing a death sentence for Sheikh Salman al-Ouda. In addition, the religious institution has tried not to challenge authoritarian rule by admitting its legitimizing role to maintain its monopolistic position and privileges. Traditionally, this approach has led to the emergence of opposition to the government outside the religious institution, and the official religious institution has been challenged in some instances (Ahmadian, 2020, p. 28). Consequently, it is expected that Bin

Salman will force the official religious institution to issue a fatwa and legitimize the normalization of ties with Israel if the slightest development takes place in the conflict between Palestine and Israel or the security threat of the axis of resistance to Saudi Arabia increases excessively. In such a circumstance, the chasm between the official religious institution in Saudi Arabia and the tendencies outside the institution will widen significantly. In other words, women, youth, educated groups, and, in general, the reformists of the Saudi society who seek some relief in the social atmosphere of the country may welcome the fatwa, but conservative traditionalist forces and revisionist Wahhabi extremists (claiming that the monarchy should collapse to establish an Islamic state) will oppose it. Neither of the two forces in Saudi society will be inclined toward the axis of resistance as they do see their identity aligned with its identity. Nonetheless, the existence of such chasms in Saudi society will lead to the clash of the forces and the weakening of an authoritarian government that has to spend its power resolving the issue, and this will have positive impacts on the axis of resistance. From an identity perspective, it should be noted that reformist forces in Saudi Arabia demand the expansion of social freedoms, the restriction of religion in social matters, the secularization of laws, political participation, and relationships with the West and even Israel – to name but a few, which oppose the identity components of the axis of resistance emphasized by Iran in the regional geo-culture. On the other hand, conservative forces and Wahhabi extremists seek to overthrow the Saudi monarchy, the full administration of sharia laws, the expansion of extremist Wahhabism across the Islamic world, the annihilation of Shiites as apostates, opposition to the West, and the destruction of the Israeli regime. Though some components of the identity set of this social force, including its emphasis on counteracting the West and the annihilation of Israel, are similar to the identity components of the axis of resistance, the

former's endeavor to eradicate Shiites – by calling them apostates – is in sheer contrast to the identity of the axis of resistance. However, it should be considered that Iran is ready to cooperate with the Salafist and extremist Taliban members if necessary – an instance is the arrival of Taliban representatives in Tehran to conduct official negotiations between Afghan groups in July 2021. Thus, there is a very small and limited possibility that the axis of resistance and the Saudi Wahhabi Salafist groups may enter into tactical cooperation to annihilate Israel and overthrow the Saudi monarchy.

It seems that the chasm between the Saudi government and the extremist Wahhabi social forces concerning regional and international matters needs to be investigated more meticulously. A major issue that Bin Salman has with the extremist Wahhabis is the fact that the latter faces remarkable international accusations in matters of terrorism and their support for violence. The roots of this issue can be traced to the concept of jihad. Excommunicating the infidels and heretics and declaring jihad against them are among the main components of the ideology of Wahhabis, and consequently Salafists, which were developed by Ibn Taymiyyah during the early days of his mission. He believed that everything absents during the Prophet and his Salaf was a heresy and had to be eliminated by force. Ibn Taymiyyah considered jihad one of the pillars of the religion and promoted it even to a higher status than Hajj, prayers, and fasting. This was also the case with Mohammed Abdel Wahab who considered jihad an essential matter and regarded it so highly that he got Muhammad ibn Saud to take an oath that he will declare jihad to propagate Salafist thoughts in his first pact with ibn Saud in 1744. The reflection of this in terms of foreign was twofold. The first part concerned the formation of multiple jihadist groups like Afghan mujahedeen, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Nusra Front, and Boko Haram – to name but a few – and infiltration into the borders of the countries in the region,

Africa, East Asia, Europe, and the U.S. (on September 11th, 2001). On the other hand, the second part consisted of the extensive accusations mounted by international legal and security organizations against the violent ideologies and terrorist acts of the extremist Wahhabis (Barzegar et al., 2020, p. 186). The issue is so aggravated that even the extremist Wahhabis consider the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the West as a deviation from the pact between Abdel Wahhab and ibn Saud and seek to overthrow the monarchy and replace it with a jihadist Islamic state. Thus, since the 1980s, the House of Saud has seen no other way than to make Wahhabis busy with external issues to divert their actions against Saudi Arabia and the monarchy. However, now that Bin Salman has started extensive reforms and tries to portray Saudi Arabia as a country that exercises tolerance in religious matters by forcing and tempting the official religious institution to issue fatwas, extremist Wahhabis express profound indignation. They challenge the Crown Prince on matters like the concept and method of development adopted by Bin Salman and various identity and cultural reforms in the form of the 2030 Document, including extending women's rights, opening cinemas, allowing mixed-gender parties, permitting the sales of alcoholic drinks in specific places, and passing a law to stop wearing mandatory hijab by non-Muslim women – to name but a few. In this regard, Wahhabi scholars have adopted at least two macro-scale approaches against Bin Salman's extensive actions and reforms. First, they have preferred to exercise patience and stay silent as the survival and presence of the Al ash-Sheikh family in religious, and political, power will be possible if only the family follows and adheres to the monarchy. The second approach concerns the extensive protests by some Wahhabi scholars like Shaikh Muhammad Rabban al-Shaikh, Shaikh Ahmad Mustafa al-Tayebi, and Shaikh Abdullah al-Tamimi, which resulted in their discharge from religious positions and the annulment of

their membership right in the Supreme Council of Wahhabism. Moreover, some of the above figures – like Shaikh Abdullah al-Tamimi – were even arrested and imprisoned (Barzegar et al., 2020, pp, 188-189, 185).

On the path toward the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, Bin Salman faces this social force with extensive authority in a religious society. At the same time, the supporters of his reforms, which are basically educated youth and women do not still a distinct class with intellectuals theorizing the reforms. Thus, Bin Salman's movement toward normalizing ties with Israel faces significant issues and can provoke irate Wahhabis who are already in opposition to his reforms. On the other hand, halting attempts to normalize ties with Israel makes a significant portion of the 2030 Document, which requires foreign investment and the arrival of international tourists to the country, and, consequently, increases the economic efficiency of the government and offers it a modern form of acceptability-driven legitimacy outside the realm of religious legitimacy, impossible.

Thus, Bin Salman has adopted two policies; on the one hand, he tries to normalize the relationships of other Arabic countries, including the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, with Israel to turn them into the vanguards of the Arab-Israel ties so that they can gain public support and illustrate the achievements of the normalization process to people. For instance, a large number of Israeli tourists have visited the UAE, and this has become a lucrative business for Dubai. On the other hand, to alleviate the pressure of extremist Wahhabi forces, Bin Salman has made the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel subject to the advancement of peace between Palestinians and Israelis. His goal is to curb any claims that Saudi Arabia has abandoned the Palestinian dream, while it is true in practice. This has created a major chasm in Saudi society, and the Wahhabi forces may redirect their attention from jihad in other countries, which is supported by the government, to the country itself

– something that threatens the government of Saudi Arabia. In this way, the chasm between the traditional forces and the modern forces that have emerged after Bin Salman's reforms will get intensified, and this will force the Crown Prince to feel significant pressure. Thus, the axis of resistance will benefit from this situation.

Indeed, Iran's adversaries in the region, which should be considered the allies of the U.S., have understood that the axis of resistance significantly extends Iran's strategic depth and influence as "resistance groups are instruments to fulfill Iran's ideals – i.e., extending regional influence and turning into the dominant power in West Asia – in the country's defense strategy. This requires influencing the neighboring countries in political, economic, and military areas. According to the Supreme Leader, the logic of Iran's activism in the region is based on the achievement of strategic depth in the world, particularly in West Asia. He believes that the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic is actualized by making a presence in the region and gaining the support of the nations. This is not limited to the region as we have strategic depth in important parts of Asia. Partly due to Islam and partly due to language and Shiism" (Vaziriyan, 2020, p. 68). Both the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf and Israel needed the American military to supply their security due to the presence of the axis of resistance. However, the U.S. is leaving the region due to its serious rivalry with China.

This has prompted Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies to establish closer ties with Israel so that the security of both parties can be safeguarded. Nevertheless, as Saudi Arabia plays a leading role for Arabs, it has made complete normalization subject to the resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict. So far (2021), Saudi Arabia has emphasized this and considers it a main condition in establishing normal and full-scale relationships with the Israeli regime. However, the country has encouraged its allies, including the UAE and Bahrain, to take

further steps by normalizing diplomatic ties with Israel through the Abraham Accords. This regional policy of Saudi Arabia is made up of two main aspects. The first aspect is that Saudi Arabia has promoted some Arabic countries to normalize ties with Israel so that they can act as mediators between them and coordinate their regional policies. In this aspect, the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel is considered an award for the latter, which can be fulfilled when a permanent peace agreement is signed between Israel and Palestine. As a sign of its serious intention to normalize ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia has encouraged its Arab allies to sign the Abraham Accords. Second, the Abraham Accords can prepare the public opinion across the Arab world to admit the normalization of ties with Israel and indicate, from a geo-cultural perspective, that novel identities and intellectual constructs have been formed between Arab leaders and Israeli ones. Moreover, the financial, technical, military, and geographical capabilities of the two parties can be aligned to maintain regional security and stability against the threat of Iran. Indeed, if the influence of Iran and the axis of resistance did not expand in the region, or the U.S. did not leave or did not have an intention of leaving the region, the process of normalization might proceed in a much slower manner. However, being afraid of Iran's regional influence has accelerated the process of normalization to safeguard security. Moreover, the second aspect, which is mostly a subjective construct for the Sunni Arabs, Saudi Arabia pursues a more important goal. In other words, if the threat and influence of Iran and the axis of resistance become more intensified, Saudi Arabia will leave the dream of Palestine aside and quickly normalize relationships with Israel based on the work performed on the public opinions beforehand. In such a situation, as a way to force Iran to prevent the advancement of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, another goal is to encourage Iran to start negotiations with Saudi Arabia to resolve

conflicts, and this can reduce the threats of the axis of resistance to Saudi Arabia.

4.2.2. The pressure felt by Fatah and the need to reconcile with Hamas

Though one of the goals pursued by Saudi Arabia in normalizing ties with Israel is to "direct Palestinians toward peace talks" (Adami et al., 2018, p. 191), it appears that the normalization will not have such an effect on Palestinians. The above argument concerns the Palestinian leaders who gave up resistance and followed the path of negotiation and compromise. They formed the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) under the leadership of the late Yassir Arafat and signed the Oslo Peace Accords with Israel to fulfill the goal of establishing an independent Palestinian state along the borders of Israel. Such leaders have relied on the support of Arabic countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, but the process of normalization will shatter their dream into pieces. Though Saudi leaders still announce that they abide by the Palestinian dream and introduce Israel's agreement to the establishment of an independent state as their precondition – or an award for Israel – for full normalization with all Arabic countries, the normalization trend, particularly after the Abraham Accords and the exchange of ambassadors between Israel and Bahrain and the UAE, has shown that supporting the formation of an independent Palestinian state by the Saudi leaders lacks any strong backing, and the covert relationships of Saudi Arabia and Israel become deeper and deeper. This is evident by the fact that "the first direct flight between Saudi Arabia and Israel took place on Monday, October 25th, 2021, and a Boeing belonging to Fly Emirates transported some passengers from Riyadh to Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. According to Jerusalem Post, the event was a part of Israel's efforts to normalize ties with Saudi Arabia." (Donya-ye Eqtesad Daily Newspaper, 2021, p. 1).

The Palestinian National Authority (Fatah) – led by Mahmud Abbas – faces a situation in which the “Two-state Solution” is over, and no support is going to be received from the Arab allies of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the countries supporting the Abdullah Peace Plan that turned it into the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002 and continued endorsing it until the Arab Spring in 2010 no longer see any advantages in pursuing the plan, and this has provoked Fatah leaders’ reaction. According to Mahmud Abbas (AKA, kunya Abu Mazen), the President of the Palestinian National Authority, normalization agreements signed between Israel and several Arabic countries “are illusions that will not bear any fruit.” According to Abbas, “peace and security can only be achieved by ending the Israeli occupation and rectifying Palestinians’ rights.” He has also added that “despite recognizing the state of Israel within the boundaries established in 1967 according to Resolutions 242 and 338 of the United Nations, the Oslo Accords, and the painful recognition of several Israeli settlements on the condition that no other settlement will be built, Israel has pursued its operations perpetually by stealing land, building settlements, establishing an apartheid system, and exercising ethnic cleansing by military force.” Moreover, he has argued that “the recent events in Al-Quds have proved that Palestinians are genuine people in their settlements and are proud of their Palestinian identity and ties. Thus, their freedom and autonomy in their capital, Al-Quds, can be fulfilled only by ending the Israeli occupation and rectifying Palestinian people’s rights” (Abu Mazen, 2021, p. 1). Thus, it clearly seems that the Fatah leaders are well aware of the purposes behind the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel and believe that the goal of establishing an independent state along the borders of Israel is shattered into pieces.

In such a situation, it is clear that the Fatah leaders need to reconcile with the leaders of groups like Hamas or the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, which are on the axis of

resistance and believe that no Palestinian state can be established as long as Israel exists, and the only way to make Israel retreat is strengthening the defense capabilities of Palestinians. Thus, it can be predicted that Fatah will try to align its positions with the above resistance groups, and this is one of the positive effects of the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel for the axis of resistance. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to consider Fatah a member of the axis of resistance even from a medium-term perspective as it has profound disagreements with the geo-culture of the axis of resistance in terms of background, structure, and promises – to name but a few.

4.2.3. The negation of the Palestinian Dream by Saudis and Muslims’ reactions to the advantage of the axis of resistance

At the same time that Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies normalize their relationships with Israel and, consequently, negate the Palestinian dream with reactions, which provokes Fatah leaders’ bitter reactions, other freedom-seeking Muslims around the world representing the public opinion across the Islamic world react to the matter. This has been evident even in gatherings in Islamic countries. Thus, in the inauguration ceremony of a conference titled “The Zionist narrative: being convicted or dissolved”, Abu Mazen said, “Some attitudes and changes have emerged on a global scale and at the level of assemblies toward reviving Palestinians’ narrative of the Middle Eastern conflict. This requires continued world and the mobilization of resources to achieve its goals and influence global decision-makers. In every capital, in their assemblies, a lot of effort has been made to emphasize Palestinians’ genuineness and their right to their ancient land, autonomy, and the establishment of an independent country with Al-Quds as its capital. The world has begun to see Israel as it is: an invader and an apartheid regime. I am sure that participants in the present conference will have a significant effect in elucidating the fact and negating the myths and incorrect narrative

propagated by this Zionist project that has been designated by Western countries to achieve their colonial goals” (Abu Mazen, 2021, p. 1).

An important consideration in this regard is the Saudi leaders’ concerns about normalization. In other words, though they have announced that their relationships will only be normalized with Israel when an agreement concerning the establishment of a Palestinian state is reached, they are in practice normalizing their ties with Israel and have made the UAE and Bahrain the vanguards of normalization to justify the process in the eyes of the public opinions across the Arabic world – particularly for the Salafist citizens of Saudi Arabia. The normalization of relationships between Israel and the above countries, which provoke less opposition and can bring about security and economic advantages for them, aims to create an Arabic-Israeli geo-culture against Iran’s resistance and Turkey’s Muslim Brotherhood geo-cultures. Thus, it is observed that Saudi leaders are deeply worried about the public opinions across the Islamic world against their hasty attempts to normalize ties with Israel. “Saudi Arabia, as the main party in this endeavor, pursues strategic motives in the normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (two allied countries that coordinate their foreign policy with that of Saudi Arabia). Indeed, Riyadh and Tel Aviv have had covert cooperation for many years typically on matters of security and information sharing. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia considers special calculations in making the relationships official due to its unique position in the Islamic world as the guardian of two holy shrines (Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques), and the House of Saud needs to maintain the legitimacy brought about by this role. Moreover, the country is much larger and involves more diversity compared to its counterparts, and there are numerous influential figures and powerful sectors within the internal power structure of the country that do not sympathize with Israel.

However, the positive signals of the political establishments of the country, particularly the younger generations represented by Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman, are evidently in favor of a different approach toward Israel, which does not prevent the normalization of ties with Israel before resolving the Palestinian conflict” (Rahman, 2021, p. 1).

The concerns of Saudi leaders about the fierce reactions of the public across the Islamic world are typically influenced by the geo-culture of the axis of resistance and its media. In addition, in the Muslim Brotherhood geo-culture of Turkey, President Erdogan has taken political stances against Israel to gain popularity among Muslims as an heir to the Ottoman Caliphate, and similar to the axis of resistance, the Muslim Brotherhood branches supported by Turkey use their media to denounce the normalization of ties between the Arab allies of Saudi Arabia and the Israeli regime. In addition, social media are highly powerful in the era of globalization and enable freedom-seeking Muslims around the world to speak about Saudi’s betrayal of the Palestinian dream and spread their ideas. In terms of public opinions, “indeed, the first test to investigate public reactions to the normalization agreements took place in April and May 2021 when Palestinians’ extensive demonstrations in Al-Quds during the holy month of Ramadan were repressed brutally by the Israeli security forces, and the demonstrators were dispersed by the invasion of the forces into the grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque. The fact that Israeli forces threw shocker grenades and tear gas into the mosque during the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, bombed the Gaza Strip in which tens of Palestinian children were killed, and encouraged the mass violence of the extremist Jewish groups against the Arab residents of Israeli cities not only added fuel to the fire resulted in a global wave of condemnation. Though it was very unlikely that such incidents could lead to withdrawal from a strategic long-term decision like normalization, they obviously troubled the states normalizing

ties with Israel, and negative reactions were made within the countries. In this way, normalization is a costly process in addition to being a risky one. A major issue that has been left unattended so far concerning unity and consensus among Arabic countries is their support of the Palestinian dream – a valuable commodity for a region that is increasingly crumbled and conflicting. Moreover, the Arab Peace Initiative is a remarkable achievement in committing the whole Arab world to normalize relationships with Israel when the latter signs a peace deal with Palestinians. Abandoning the initiative, despite the fact that it could not raise a lot of attention over the past two decades, is a major loss. This is also the case in terms of losing integrated support for the people of Palestine as supplying their freedom and rights is a moral obligation for the people of the region and the world at large.” (Rahman, 2021, p. 1). However, the normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies without achieving the above goal has created a major chasm in the Arab League and has questioned the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia. Negating the Palestinian dream by the normalizing countries provokes public opinions in Arab countries, is beneficial for the axis of resistance, and is among the positive impacts of normalization for the axis. Thus, public opinions across the Islamic world were so provoked that they endorsed Hamas’s harsh response when it launched more than a thousand missiles a night at Israel in the spring of 2021.

4.2.4. Creating chasms between the Israeli government and society for the benefit of the axis of resistance

Another instance that is highly important in the normalization of ties is the attitudes of the Israeli regime and society toward the normalization of ties with Arabs. It should not be assumed that protests to the normalization of ties are limited to Arabic countries and the public attitudes across the Islamic world on the grounds that the Palestinian dream is negated.

Rather, based on the teachings of the Torah and the political ideas of Herzl in the global Zionist movement, not only is the Promised Land seriously pursued as a dream, there exists another ideal titled the Nile-to-Euphrates dream, and this is evident in the flag designated for the regime. Thus, as stated above, after signing the Abraham Accords, and violence against Muslims broke out in the Al-Aqsa Mosque by the Israeli security forces, the situation between the Arab citizens of Israel and the Jewish settlers got intensified in several cities and settlements. It should be added that Palestinians apparently demonstrated to denounce the imminent expulsion of six Palestinian families from their houses located in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Quds. However, they were dissatisfied with the Abraham Accords, and the imminent expulsion was only an excuse that exploded a barrel filled with gunpowder. According to a report by New York Times, within the week following the event, “every night, duel groups made up of young men – both Jewish and Arab – gather in the streets of various cities and throw stones and Molotov cocktails to each other and carry knives and guns. For example, according to the mayor of Lod, three hundred protesters have been arrested, and the city is on the verge of a civil war. Rockets are launched from the Hamas-led Gaza Strip toward Israel on a daily basis. Israeli fighter jets raze buildings to the ground in Gaza, and a war with destructive consequences repeats in the region. In the middle of this deadly escalation of violence, a new alarming truth emerged that threatened Israel from the inside. Mixed cities in Israel, where Israeli Jews and Arabs lived in peace for many years, are experiencing the worst cases of civil violence since the establishment of Israel in 1948. The cities have been founded on the basis of coexistence (though it is sometimes referred to as the illusion of coexistence), but neighbors have become enemies these days. Perhaps the tensions were nowhere as tangible as in Lod – a poor city 15 miles to the south of Tel Aviv

(Margalit, 2021, p. 1). After a period of stability in the internal construction of the policies of the Israeli regime when the competition was limited to the Labor and Likud parties and lasted from 1948 until the end of the 20th century with the main parties established according to the ideals of the early founder like Herzl took power (i.e., secular parties), the dissolution of the former USSR resulted in the adoption of the East European (Ashkenazi) Jews as the citizens of the regime. This happened due to the fact that the regime was under a lot of pressure from the Palestinian population, and increasing its Jewish population was a way to maintain balance against that pressure. Using this population, the regime managed to build more settlements in Palestinians' lands and evicted their Arab Palestinian settlers. Nevertheless, similar to the Russian Christians, the East European Jews had a detrimental consequence for the regime as they were Orthodox Jews. When this Orthodox population became citizens of Israel, they turned into extremist Jewish fundamentalists, transformed the political composition of the regime, and conquered Knesset by receiving voting rights and establishing parties like Yisrael Beiteinu (a right-wing, nationalist, and secular party led by Avigdor Lieberman), Yamina (a right-wing party for the Orthodox and migrant Jews led by Naftali Bennett), United Torah Judaism (a traditionalist Ashkenazi party led by Yaakov Litzman), and Kadima (a newly-established right-wing party led by Netanyahu) (Jewish Virtual Library, 2021, p. 1). By the votes of Eastern Europe Jews, the parties control many seats in Knesset that used to belong to modern, secular, liberal, and socialist parties and have led to a political deadlock in the regime, resulting in the formation of an abnormal government made up of a coalition of traditional and modern right-wing Jewish politicians, Israeli Arab parties, and even some left-wing parties, and it is unclear how much the administration will survive. The pressure was so significant that Israel passed a law based on which the equality of Israeli Jews and Arabs,

which was recognized by the constitution of the regime and had been emphasized since the emergence of the Zionist movement in 1948, was repudiated, and the regime adopted a religious and fundamentalist policy. The passage of the law in Knesset, which provoked the fierce opposition of the Arab and secular MPs, turn Israel into the Jewish Republic of Israel. This is the very extremist religious element that "Herzl considered the reason for the loss of Jews' land in history in his works and reminded the early founders of the movement to keep away from it" (Zibakalam, 2011, p. 351).

Such extremist and fundamental Jewish citizens oppose any form of compromise with Arabs and, consequently, approve of the normalization of ties with Arabs only to the extent that it can promote the security of the regime. Though the normalization process is advancing at the moment, Saudi Arabia still claims that the full-scale normalization of relationships between Arabs and Israel will take place after the conclusion of a peace deal between Israel Palestinians, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and the termination of the construction of settlements. If the circumstance changes a little, and Arabs insist on their demands, the existence of an abnormal coalition government in the political sphere of Israel will bring about a remarkable chasm between the government of the regime, which seeks to normalize ties with Arab countries so that it can guarantee its security and survival within an Arab-dominated region in the absence of the U.S., and its extremist citizens. Thus, the latter will vote in favor of the parties that do not pursue the policy of normalization. This is absolutely beneficial for the axis of resistance and will be another positive effect of the normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies and the Israeli regime.

4.2.5. The gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the region with beneficial consequences for the axis of resistance

Despite the existence of the axis of resistance and the increased influence of Iran over the region, Saudi Arabia, its Arab allies, and Israel could rely on the U.S. military to safeguard their security. Nonetheless, as the U.S. – the strategic ally of both Arabs and Israel – is withdrawing from the region, the Arabic countries are the main losers. That is because “as the U.S. moves away from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council, Israel is the only country in the region with intact stability. According to the Arab nations of the region, Israel is a country with a powerful economy and military forces and can defend critical interests in the region. This has become a foundation to nurture the development of relationships between Israel and the Sunni-populated Arabic countries of the region. Thus, the bond between Israel and the Arab Nations of the Persian Gulf region as a strategic relationship and the significance of the domestic and regional issues are remarkable to such an extent that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia talked about the cooperation between the two countries during a conference in Washington D. C. in this way: “a combination of the talent of Israel and Arab’s money can have a positive impact on any region.” However, the bigger truth lying behind all of these matters is whether Israel can supply these countries with anything they lack – i.e., major advancements in terms of security and water and hygiene technologies. Nonetheless, serious cooperation between Israel and Arabic countries requires an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement to avoid any opposition. The only way to overcome this obstacle is to select the following path: first, creating some form of relationship that acts as an integrated umbrella for Israel and the Arab nations of the region, and, second, directing Palestinians toward participation in peace talks based on the relationship established before” (Adami et al., 2018, p. 191). It is observed in practice that normalization proceeds without taking into account the condition of Palestinians. This has led to bitter reactions across the Islamic world, particularly

among the leaders of Fatah, and has escalated tensions between Israeli Arabs and extremist Jews in the cities across Israel.

In the meantime, it seems that the leaders of the U.S. have understood that they are no longer able to remain in West Asia – in other words, they do lack the power to counteract China and guarantee the security of Israel and the Arab allies of the U.S. against Iran’s axis of resistance at the same time; thus, the solution is to make the Arab States of the Persian Gulf and Israel rely on each other to maintain their security and survival. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from the region will bring about to power vacuum mostly beneficial to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its resistance axis in the region. It should be noted that the U.S.’s global competition with China to stay as the superior power in the world is so important that “the reduction of the military presence of the U.S. in the Middle East is one of the rare political decisions agreed by both the Biden and Trump administrations. President Biden seeks to prioritize the United States and counteract the growing power of China. American forces are stationed in the majority of countries in the Middle East (except Iran), and each country hosts a certain number – though very limited in some cases – of American forces. The U.S. forces were even stationed in Yemen and performed operations against ISIS and Al-Qaeda. However, they ended their work in February 2020. In addition, there are 600 American soldiers in Syria and 2500 in Iraq, and the regions are more turbulent compared to other places where American forces are stationed. American forces are mostly concentrated in several Arab States of the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE) comprising more than half of the U.S. military in the region. Some other American forces are at Incirlik Air Base – a NATO military base in Turkey. The U.S. has another base in Jordan, and American forces were transferred to this base after their withdrawal from Iran following Iran’s missile attack on Al-Asad Base close to the end of 2020 and

early 2021 (Yasser, 2021, p. 1). In addition, the U.S. has completely withdrawn its forces from Afghanistan in the east of Iran, and its threat to Iran along the latter's eastern borders has been mitigated.

American forces safeguarded the security of Israel and Arabic regimes in the region, but the withdrawal will bring about a power vacuum. Israel and the Arab allies of Saudi Arabia fear that Iran will overthrow the power balance in the region to its advantage through the influence of its axis of resistance. Thus, numerous military exercises held by the participation of Arabic countries, Israel, Western countries, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan – to name but a few – indicate the very truth that they intend to maintain the power balance of the region after the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East and counteract Iran and its axis of resistance. In this way, it is evident that the U.S. withdrawal from the region is another positive impact of the normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies and is considered an important opportunity for Iran and the axis.

Conclusion

The normalization of ties between Arabic countries led by Saudi Arabia and Israel has gained momentum since 2015 due to the support provided by the U.S., as the driving force behind the process, to counteract Iran's axis of resistance, as the main factor, and can be regarded as the Arab-Hebrew regionalist policy. Thus, it is expected that Saudi Arabia will officially declare its relationship with the Israeli regime. This process poses some threats to the

axis of resistance and has prompted many researchers to focus just on the threats to the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its regionalist policy within the framework of the axis of resistance. On the other hand, the present study tried to consider the opportunities of the trend, particularly as it was observed that the process of normalization had other opponents other than Iran and the axis of resistance (e.g., in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and across the Islamic world). Thus, the process of normalization has provided opportunities for the axis of resistance that can boost it and, consequently, the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some major opportunities provided in this way include the creation of a chasm between the government and society of Saudi Arabia, the pressure felt by the Fatah movement to get aligned with Hamas, the negation of the Palestinian dream by Saudi Arabia and Muslims' reactions to that, the creation of a chasm between the government and society of Israel, and the gradual withdrawal of the U.S. from the region. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized again that, apart from the above opportunities, the threats posed by the process of normalizing ties between Arabic countries led by Saudi Arabia and Israel for the axis of resistance should not be overlooked. Thus, the above opportunities should be exploited within the policy of regionalism so that the threats can be transformed into opportunities by compensating for the weaknesses of the axis of resistance.

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