

# A Third of Saudis Want Business With Israel Now, Even Without Formal Ties; “Muslim Rights” Top List of Public’s Terms for Full Normalization

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

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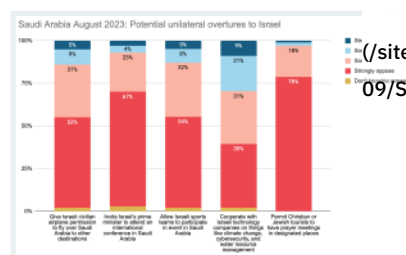
Brief Analysis

## A unique new public opinion poll from Saudi Arabia sheds light on popular attitudes there toward a potential deal to “normalize” relations with Israel.

In this exceedingly rare systematic survey, even without a formal agreement with Israel, a significant minority of Saudi society is favorably disposed toward business ties with it. Around a third say that when it comes to “some initial steps short of official relations,” they would approve this one: “Cooperate with Israeli technology companies on things like climate change, cybersecurity, and water resource management.” That proportion is slightly higher (33%) among Saudi adults under 30 years old than among their elders (28%). Overall, this represents a slight decline (possibly due to the current Israeli government’s hard-right tilt) compared with responses to very similar questions over the past three years, where the level of acceptance of allowing “business ties” with Israel approached 40%.

### Other Unilateral Overtures to Israel Are Not Popular

In sharp contrast, however, other overtures toward Israel in advance of a formal accord—even ones already in effect—garner very little popular support. A mere 14% agree to “give Israeli civilian airplanes permission to fly over Saudi Arabia to other destinations.” Only 13% would “allow Israeli sports teams to participate in events in Saudi Arabia.” And, not too surprisingly, a negligible 7% would “invite Israel’s prime minister to attend an international conference in Saudi Arabia.”



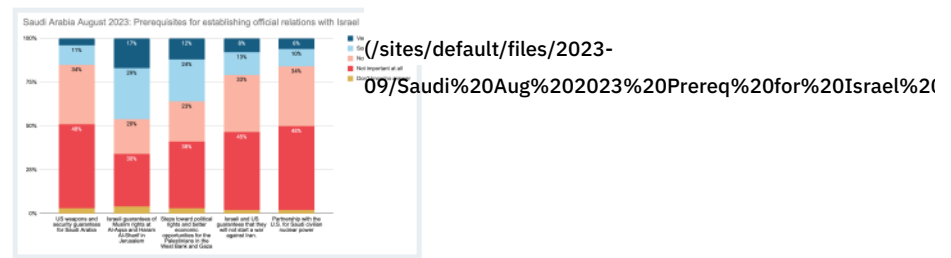
### Israeli Guarantee of “Muslim Rights” Leads Popular Terms for Official Ties

When asked about possible factors “in considering whether or not Saudi Arabia should establish official relations with Israel,” the Saudi public opts first for an Islamic—rather than a specifically Saudi—agenda: almost half (46%) say it would be “important” to obtain “new Israeli guarantees of Muslim rights at al-Aqsa Mosque and al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.” Prioritizing this issue is significantly more popular than any other option offered. Significantly, only a tiny minority (4%) either didn’t know or declined to answer, potentially indicating agreement with the explicitly stated position that “Saudi Arabia should not establish official relations with Israel under any conditions.”

This popular focus on religion is in line with responses to other controversial questions in the survey. Exactly the same percentage, for example, feel “strongly” that “our country should cut off all relations with any other country where anybody hurts the Quran.”

### **Palestinian Rights Are a Secondary Concern**

By comparison, Palestinian aspirations come in second place in Saudi popular perceptions of a deal with Israel. Thirty-six percent of the Saudi public say it would be “important” to obtain “new steps toward political rights and better economic opportunities for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.”



This secondary status probably reflects, at least in part, the Saudi public’s very low opinion of the Palestinian political leadership in either territory. A mere 15% of Saudis voice even a “somewhat positive” view of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, with even fewer (10%) expressing a favorable view of Hamas in Gaza.

### **U.S. Inputs to Normalization Deal Rank Unexpectedly Low**

Far behind these drivers in popular attitudes, surprisingly, are hypothetical American contributions to a Saudi-Israel deal—even though these have reportedly been under heavy discussion at the official level in recent months. Only 15% of Saudis say it would be important to acquire “new American weapons and security guarantees for Saudi Arabia.” A statistically equivalent small minority (16%) say it would also be important to have “a new partnership with the U.S. for Saudi civilian nuclear power.”

A likely contributing factor behind these highly counterintuitive findings is the widespread sentiment that American commitments are unreliable lately, and as such should not be taken too seriously into consideration. The majority (61%) of Saudi citizens in this survey, as in previous ones over the past two years, agree at least “somewhat” with this purposefully provocative proposition: “We cannot count on the U.S. these days, so we should look more to other countries like Russia or China as partners.”

### **Support for “Modern” Islam at Record High, But Interfaith Tolerance Lags Far Behind**

Offered an explicit choice in this survey between “the traditional view of Islam” and “those who are trying to interpret Islam in a more modern direction,” 48% prefer the latter option. This represents the highest proportion ever recorded on very similar questions, in a slow but steady rise over recent years; in 2017, the corresponding figure stood at just 27%.

However, this moderate trend does not extend to interfaith matters. Only a tiny minority (3%) say they would “permit Christian or Jewish tourists to have prayer meetings in designated places.” A statistically equivalent fringe (5%) say that “we should show more respect for the world’s Jews, and improve our relations with them.”

### **Iran Remains Unpopular, Despite Restoration of Official Ties**

As another part of a potential normalization deal, only a small minority (21%) would attach importance to “new American and Israeli guarantees that they will not start a war against Iran.” In that connection, only a similarly small minority (19%) say it is important for Saudi Arabia to have good relations with Iran. Nevertheless, a significantly larger minority (36%) express a positive view of “the restorations of diplomatic and other ties between Arab Gulf countries and Iran.” Notably, this figure rises modestly among the Saudi Shia community concentrated in the Eastern Province, where 47% express a positive view.

### **Policy Implications**

While Saudi Arabia remains an authoritarian monarchy, today’s Saudi government does take public opinion into some account in making tough decisions—as its own very private polls, intensive social media trend research, and multifarious “citizens’ dialogues” attest. Therefore, based on this analysis of these new survey findings, all three governments involved in a possible trilateral U.S.-Saudi-Israel deal would be well advised to pay at least as much attention to its *religious* dimension as to its political, security, and economic ones.

This will surely be a challenge for Israel’s current hardline right-wing ruling coalition, and more than likely for the Saudi and American governments as well. But including this angle in their policy calculations is now demonstrably the best way to help garner Saudi popular acceptance—and hence lasting value—from any new Saudi-American-Israeli accord.

### **Methodological Note**

This analysis is based on findings from an August 2023 survey commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted by a highly qualified, experienced, and independent regional commercial survey firm. The survey comprised face-to-face interviews with a representative national

sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens, selected according to standard geographic probability procedures. The contractor provided strict quality controls and assurances of confidentiality throughout the fieldwork, coding, and data processing. The theoretical margin of error for a sample of this size and nature is approximately plus or minus three percentage points. Additional methodological details, including full questionnaire, marginal results, and demographic breaks, are readily available upon request. ❖

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