



THE BLOGS

Sergio Restelli

US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and problems for the Abraham accords



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As Mohammed bin Salman prepares for his visit to Washington, the diplomatic theater surrounding a possible Saudi–Israel normalization agreement is reaching a fever pitch. The Trump administration wants a breakthrough that would crown the Abraham Accords with the one partner previous presidents could never secure. Israel sees the opportunity as a strategic shift of historic magnitude. Saudi Arabia, however, is negotiating from a position of calculated leverage. What is missing from much of the public conversation is a third actor whose presence risks destabilising every part of the proposed arrangement: Pakistan.

At its core, Saudi normalization with Israel hinges on a substantial American offer. Riyadh wants a formal security pact with Washington that would anchor US commitments in writing, grant privileged access to advanced American weapons and confirm Saudi Arabia as a central partner in the region's future architecture. It also seeks US approval for a civilian nuclear program under terms that would bring the kingdom's capabilities closer to those enjoyed by established nuclear states. The political dimension matters as well. Saudi officials have maintained that any recognition of Israel must be paired with a credible pathway toward Palestinian

statehood, something robust enough to justify the shift to both the Arab world and Saudi Arabia's own population.

Israel, for its part, appears ready to accommodate several Saudi demands. Officials in Jerusalem understand the magnitude of Saudi recognition and have adopted a more flexible tone on issues that once might have been deal-breakers. If the United States is prepared to underwrite the arrangement, Israel is unlikely to obstruct weapons transfers or nuclear cooperation, as long as its qualitative military edge remains intact and the political concessions demanded of it remain limited and manageable. The current Israeli government is not enthusiastic about any steps involving the Palestinians, but it also recognises that a cold peace with Saudi Arabia is preferable to the strategic stagnation of the past decades.

For Donald Trump, the calculation is political and personal. Securing a Saudi–Israel breakthrough would give him a diplomatic achievement that his predecessors failed to secure and would reaffirm Washington's primacy at a time of growing global competition. His administration has signaled a willingness to bend on issues that were once tightly controlled, including nuclear cooperation and the speed of advanced weapons transfers. The message to Riyadh is clear: the White House is ready to make the deal work, if Saudi Arabia commits.

This carefully choreographed triangle, however, sits atop a neglected minefield. In 2024, Saudi Arabia entered into a mutual defense pact with Pakistan that binds the two countries to respond jointly to external aggression. On paper, the agreement seemed like a symbolic renewal of a long-standing partnership. In practice, it introduces a highly unpredictable variable into what is supposed to become a stable, US-anchored regional order.

Pakistan's strategic record does not inspire confidence. For decades, Islamabad's military establishment has relied on brinkmanship and covert action as tools of statecraft. Its nuclear posture has been shaped by risk-acceptance rather than restraint, and its internal political battles often spill outward into its foreign policy. The idea that such a state can function as a dependable part of a delicate Saudi–US–Israel security system stretches credibility to its limits.

Pakistan's domestic politics add another layer of concern. Anti-Israel sentiment remains deeply embedded in both elite discourse and popular opinion. Even a

symbolic Saudi–Israel agreement would create intense pressure on Pakistan’s leaders, who may try to balance public anger by adopting a harder line on issues involving Israel or by demanding private reassurances from Riyadh. The possibility that the Pakistan–Saudi pact could be invoked rhetorically or politically in a moment of crisis cannot be dismissed.

The most troubling element is the ambiguity created by the mutual defense clause itself. If a militant group operating from Pakistani territory attacks Israeli interests, or if Israel conducts a covert operation that Islamabad interprets as aggression, Saudi Arabia would find itself legally entangled in a confrontation it never intended to join. Even if Riyadh attempted to distance itself in practice, the written commitment would complicate its position with both Washington and Jerusalem. Ambiguity of this kind is not compatible with the trust required for a groundbreaking regional agreement.

The Pakistan connection also undermines the very logic of a US–Saudi security pact. Washington’s aim is to create a more coherent, disciplined security structure in the Middle East, one that integrates Israel rather than marginalises it. Pakistan’s involvement pulls in the opposite direction. Its close ties to China, its history of security leaks and its unpredictable military politics raise real questions about how far the United States can go in sharing sensitive defense technologies with a country tied so tightly to Islamabad. Israel will have the same reservations, particularly when the discussion turns to advanced aircraft and missile defense systems.

Saudi recognition of Israel is meant to be the crown jewel of a new regional landscape. Yet by deepening its defense dependency on Pakistan, Riyadh has blurred the clarity that such a transformative step requires. A state that is simultaneously seeking American protection, preparing to normalize with Israel and binding itself to a nuclear-armed and politically volatile Pakistan is sending mixed signals about its strategic priorities.

None of this means Saudi–Israel normalization is doomed. It remains within reach. But it will only be meaningful if built on firm foundations. That requires unambiguous commitments from Riyadh about the primacy of its defense ties with Washington, full transparency regarding its cooperation with Pakistan and clear assurances that the Pakistan–Saudi pact cannot be interpreted in any way that implicates Israel.

The Middle East has had enough ill-fated diplomatic triumphs that collapsed at the first shock. If the region is to avoid repeating that history, the uncomfortable truth about Pakistan’s role must be confronted honestly. A historic agreement cannot rest on wishful thinking or on the hope that an unpredictable partner will behave predictably. Strategic clarity, not sentiment, is what will determine whether this diplomatic moment becomes a durable achievement or another fragile illusion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sergio Restelli is an Italian political advisor, author and geopolitical expert. He served in the Craxi government in the 1990's as the special assistant to the deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Martelli and worked closely with anti-mafia magistrates Falcone and Borsellino. Over the past decades he has been involved in peace building and diplomacy efforts in the Middle East and North Africa. He has written for Geopolitica and several Italian online and print media. In 2020 his first fiction "Napoli sta bene" was published.

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The timings is too much coincidental.

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