



EXPLICIT OVERTURES: THE CHANGING FACE OF SAUDI-ISRAEL RELATIONS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



During an all-encompassing interview during his current United States tour in March 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman foretold his vision for the future of the Middle East, including the prospect of harmony with Israel stating that, “I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land.”¹

These remarks echoed the ever-increasing warmer tone toward Israel espoused by the de facto ruler of a powerful Arab country that once resisted the mere idea of Israel’s right to exist.

In an effort to offset Mohammad bin Salman's explosive statement, Prince Mohammed’s father, King Salman immediately reaffirmed, “the Kingdom’s steadfast position towards the Palestinian issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.”² This, of course, does little to mitigate Mohammad bin Salman's comments, and who is seen as leading the process of reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s visit to the United States has raised many eyebrows. This visit can be viewed broadly as a PR campaign aimed at representing a new face of the Kingdom to the US, one that is open to change. His itinerary in Washington included among others, meetings with leaders from the Conference of Presidents, B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee

¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018.

² "Saudi Prince Signals Shift on Israel; King Restates Stand," *Dawn*, April 4, 2018.

(AJC), The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) – all of which have long targeted Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), a non-violent Palestinian-led movement that seeks to promote various forms of boycott against Israel until it meets its obligations "under international law" to provide equal rights and a right of return to Palestinians.

While Saudi Arabia does not officially recognize Israel, these signs are an indication by Mohammad bin Salman towards explicitly doing so.

This is however not a new phenomenon.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Arab governments became more fixated on modernization and political permanency, leaving the one active question of Palestinian statehood dormant. Simultaneously, Israeli and Saudi officials began acknowledging potential collaboration as their apprehensions converged during the revolution in Iran in 1979. Both parties were clearly unhappy about the rise of new Shia power in the region, and an indication of the progression of Arab-Israeli relations.

In 2015, Israel announced that it was opening its first representative office in the United Arab Emirates.³ For many years, countries in the region have toyed with the idea of lifting the longtime ban on Israeli aircrafts over Arab airspace, and only last month in March 2018, Saudi Arabia allowed Air India to use its airspace to fly to and from Tel Aviv. Even a number of Israeli officials have been direct about their wish to take on Saudi Arabia as a partner and associate with the Kingdom. In June 2017, Israel's intelligence and transportation minister, Yisrael Katz, asked Saudi Arabia's King Salman to invite Prime Minister Netanyahu to Riyadh so that full diplomatic relations could be established.⁴

No doubt, for Israel, Saudi Arabia's growing inclination to counter and curb Iranian influence in the Middle East offers an opening for an alliance. As the Kingdom's aggressive Crown Prince tries to unite an anti-Iran federation, Israel, seeing an opportunity, is not pulling any stops at presenting itself as a willing and able partner.

The incentives are much greater for Saudi Arabia than Israel though. Last year, the Kingdom announced it would finally lift the ban on women driving. Less than a month later, Mohammed bin Salman stated that he wanted to accentuate "moderate Islam"⁵ in a Kingdom long molded by

³ "Israel to Open Representative Office in Abu Dhabi, First in UAE," *Reuters*, November 27, 2015.

⁴ "Israeli Minister Calls for Full Saudi Ties and Official Riyadh Visit," *Middle East Eye*.

⁵ Ian Black, "Saudi Crown Prince's Modernization Drive: How Real Is It?" *CNN*, October 25, 2017.

ultraconservative views. The Crown Prince even conscripted an economic plan to halt Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil revenue.

Hence, keeping all this in mind, instead of seeing Israel as an enemy, Prince Mohammed seems to have come to the conclusion that the Jewish state is a regional economic and technological hub, as well as a potential cohort in the Kingdom's cold war with Iran. During his interview, Prince Mohammed confirmed this idea when he said that, "Israel is a big economy compared to their size and it's a growing economy, and of course 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 Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countries like Egypt and Jordan."⁶

Added to all this is President Trump's persistent wooing of the Saudis. In his meeting with the Prince, President Trump lauded the fact that. "we've become very good friends over a fairly short period of time,"⁷ and that there are, "hundreds of billions of dollars"⁸ in Saudi money coming to America in the form of arms deals. "That's peanuts to you,"⁹ Trump joked as he displayed details of the weapon deals the leaders had just made.

Essentially, Prince Mohammed's visit to the US is mainly a hunting trip for investment, and an opportunity for him to sell his Vision 2030, which though elaborate on paper, is still mainly an unexecuted plan to upgrade the Kingdom into modernity, and hence end its dependence on oil. The Crown Prince's erratic comments during various interviews all point towards him trying to win favor with the Americans, who in turn are merely proxies for the real bigwigs running the show - the right wing Jewish lobby. It's an open secret that the US economy is primarily run by the Israeli lobby, and in effect it's the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the lobbying group, that advocates pro-Israel policies to the Congress and Executive Branch of the United States.

The question which arises here is: Where does this leave the two-state solution, and what will be the fate of Jerusalem?

It's common knowledge that Prince Mohammed has a close relationship with the Trump administration, and particularly with the president's son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, whom the president has delegated to try to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *The Atlantic*, April 02, 2018.

⁷ "Remarks by President Trump and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Before Bilateral Meeting," *The White House*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

A week before the Prince's visit to the US, senior Saudi, Emirati, Qatari and Omani officials all met with their Israeli counterparts at a one-day summit in the White House to discuss ways of assuaging the ever declining humanitarian situation in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority - the prime stakeholder - was absent altogether at the summit.

The recent use of military force on peaceful protestors in Gaza and the US blockage of a draft statement by the United Nations Security Council that called for an investigation into the killing of unarmed Palestinian protestors near the Gaza Strip's eastern border is also alarming in itself.

It is safe to say that the Palestinian cause has taken a back, almost non-existent seat on the international platform, least of all for the Muslim world's so-called leader – Saudi Arabia.

But the Kingdom alone is not to blame for this. The lack of Palestinian leadership also has a major, if not equal, role to play. In fact, there are undertones that the political divide is entering the social fabric of the Palestinians.

The Saudis remain reluctant to publicly acknowledge or accept that relations are, indeed, improving. But under the table, both Riyadh and Tel Aviv agree that the enemy of your enemy is your friend.

At the end of the day, for Saudis it is about two things primarily: successfully executing Vision 2030 and countering the Iranian threat. The Palestinian cause has succumbed to becoming an impediment in what the Saudis visualize as the bigger picture: catering to a staggering economy and maintaining their hegemony in the region.