

Saudi-Israel Dialogue: What Lies Ahead?

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Over the last year there have been reports in the Israeli media about top level meetings between Saudi and Israeli leaders that took place in 2006. At the same time, the media also reported the efforts of Prime Minister Olmert and Shimon Peres, then the deputy prime minister, to meet with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis denied the reports about the high level meetings, and rejected attempts by the prime minister and his deputy to meet with King Abdullah. Against this backdrop, the following essay attempts to shed light on the chances for Saudi-Israeli dialogue, given the internal constraints that limit the Saudi government's freedom of movement.

The 2006 Meetings and their Objectives

Last September there were reports in the Israeli media about meetings between senior Saudi and Israeli figures. The reports intimated that the meetings were of a political nature, as opposed to meetings relating to exchange of intelligence information or business dealings that take place from time to time directly and indirectly with Saudi figures. The reports included items about Prime Minister Olmert holding secret meetings with a senior Saudi figure in Jordan, hinting/assuming that the figure was King Abdullah himself. There were also reports that there had been several meetings between Israelis and Saudis attended by Prince Bandar. Bandar, son of Defense Minister Prince Sultan, served as Saudi ambassador to the United States for over twenty years, and since October 2005 has served as general secretary of the Saudi National Security Council. Unlike

previous instances where the Saudis ignored the reports, this time they hastened to deny the reports. Prince Sultan, Bandar's father, was the most prominent voice, saying that it was absurd to think that any Saudi would meet with an Israeli, and even more absurd to consider a meeting with Saudi leaders.

Notwithstanding the Saudi denials, which were designed primarily for internal purposes, it seems that during 2006 and up to early 2007, there were in fact several meetings between Prince Bandar and Israeli officials. On the other hand and contrary to the reports, there was no meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and Saudi king Abdullah. The presumption of such a meeting indicated more about Israeli aspirations than about Israeli understanding of domestic Saudi political dynamics, which would sanction such a meeting only if it yielded significant results for Saudi Arabia. In early 2007, an opposition Saudi periodical published in

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London claimed there had been further contacts in Washington, between Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi ambassador to the US who resigned in December 2006, and head of the Israeli Mossad, Meir Dagan. The latter contacts have not been confirmed and it is possible that this report is connected to the power struggle in the Saudi court between the Sudairi line, of which Bandar is a member, and the faction of King Abdullah, of which Prince Turki is a member.

The main topic raised by the Saudis in the political talks with Prince Bandar was apparently the Palestinian issue. The Saudis tried to decipher the Israeli position on King Abdullah's peace plan, with a view to advancing a solution to the Palestinian issue. Abdullah's peace plan was publicized in 2002 and was accepted, with amendments, at a summit meeting in Damascus that year, and reaffirmed at the Riyadh summit in 2007. Other areas of discussion that feature highly on the Saudi agenda, such as the situation in Iraq or the Iranian nuclear program, were not prominent at these meetings. The Saudis do not regard Israel as a relevant partner for these issues.

The round of talks between Prince Bandar and Israeli officials during 2006 was terminated in 2007. The main reason seems to be internal Palestinian developments (although there were also reports in the foreign press that Bandar's position in the royal family has declined). In the Mecca agreement of February 2007, the Saudi government tried to reconcile Fatah loyalists with Hamas supporters, in order to present a unified Palestinian position. This attempt failed, and the drawing card of Palestinian unity and a cohesive Palestinian government, which the Saudis would have liked to show Israel ahead of generating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations,

was lost. Given the circumstances and due to their reluctance to extend the dialogue with Israel beyond the Palestinian issue, it is easy to understand why the talks with Israel were suspended. On a side note: since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip and the subsequent establishment of a new Palestinian government in the West Bank, the Saudis have yet adhered to the need for Palestinian unity, and have continued to call for repair of the divisions in the Palestinian camp.

The Saudi Position on Israel

Saudi Arabia has come a long way in its stance on Israel. Between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s Saudi Arabia adhered to the line that Israel had no right to exist as a regional state. A change in its position began after the assassination of King Faisal in 1975. Following the peace initiative launched by Egyptian president Sadat in 1977, Egypt was no longer the driving force of the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The vacuum that emerged in the Arab world was seized temporarily at the Baghdad summit of 1978 by extremist elements in the Arab world, specifically, Iraq and Syria.

Due to its economic and political ties with Western states, Saudi Arabia could not allow itself to be led by extremist factions. In 1981, Saudi crown prince Fahd (who was crowned king in 1982) proposed a surprising initiative for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. In what became known as the Fahd initiative, the Saudis abandoned their policy that had negated the existence of Israel and made it clear that the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict was the Palestinian problem. Out of eight principles noted by the Fahd initiative, six addressed the Palestinian issue; only two of the clauses referred to withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The Fahd initiative declared

that in return for Israeli willingness to withdraw to the 1967 borders and the creation of an independent Palestinian state with [Arab] Jerusalem as its capital, all the states of the region would be able to live in peace.

Twenty years later, in 2002, Crown Prince Abdullah (who became king in 2005) proposed a new initiative. The Abdullah initiative essentially did not extend beyond the principles of the Fahd initiative, although its wording broke new ground in certain instances. The Abdullah initiative reflected the developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict of the previous twenty years (especially the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, the Oslo principles, and the several subsequent agreements that were signed with the Palestinians). The demand of the Fahd initiative that Israel withdraw to the 1967 borders remained, as did the demand for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, with [Arab] Jerusalem as its capital. There was a semantic softening on the matter of the Palestinian refugees, whereby the principle of the Fahd initiative that guaranteed the right of return for Palestinians who wished to return and financial compensation for those who preferred it was replaced in the Abdullah initiative by the moderate wording of “a just solution” to the problem of Palestinian refugees, to be agreed on “in accordance with” UN Security Council resolution 194, namely: the solution to the problems of the refugees must be acceptable to Israel, and Israel is not bound to comply with all the clauses of resolution 194 – hence the moderation. (In the 2002 Damascus Summit resolution, which approved the Abdullah initiative, the wording on the solution to the Palestinian refugee problem was hardened when it stipulated that the solution be “in conformity with” UN resolu-

tion 194, in other words, that all the clauses of the resolution were binding). With regard to the issue of what Israel receives in return, here too the Abdullah initiative reflected recent developments in the Arab-Israeli arena. While the Fahd initiative aspired to the region’s states being able to live in peace, the Abdullah initiative talked explicitly about ending the conflict, peace treaties with Israel, and normalizing relations with Israel as part of a total peace agreement.

Both the Fahd and Abdullah initiatives were originally publicized by crown princes in interviews with senior American journalists (Katharine Graham, owner of the *Washington Post*, and Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*). These were not incidental interviews; rather, they were well planned statements given before each royal figure became king. The intention was to improve Saudi Arabia’s image in the Western world (the Fahd initiative emerged after Saudi Arabia rejected the Sadat initiative, in response to pressure exerted on Saudi Arabia by radical Arab elements who took control of the Arab world at the Baghdad Summit in 1978; the Abdullah initiative was publicized a few months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks) but also, and perhaps mainly, to hint at the policy that should be expected from the person who would inherit the throne, without obligating the king to adopt it as official policy. This approach, though alien to the Western world, is designed to bypass expected internal objection. Policy initiatives of a crown prince in Saudi Arabia do not necessitate preliminary discussion with internal influential political forces, and certainly not if the initiatives are offered as part of interviews to the media. This is not the case with policy initiatives of a king, which require a consensus among powerful groupings or factors in the administration.



King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia

The talks between Prince Bandar and the Israelis in 2006 were thus in one sense a direct continuation of the traditional fundamental Saudi stance that views the Palestinian problem as the nucleus of the Arab-Israeli conflict and in another sense, an attempt to bypass internal constraints on such dialogue.

Based on the principles of the Fahd and Abdullah initiatives, the Saudis made several attempts over the years to advance a solution to the Palestinian problem. This activity was evident in diplomatic discussions that the Saudis conducted with their counterparts in the United States and West European countries who were anxious to find a solution to the Palestinian problem. This also took place through more direct involvement – such as with the involvement of Prince Bandar when he was ambassador to the US – for example, in US efforts to convene the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, or the prince's failed effort to persuade PLO chairman Arafat to accept Prime Minister Barak's proposal at the Camp David Conference in 2000. Indeed, to this day Bandar refers to Arafat's refusal to accept Barak's proposal as a "crime."

At no stage did the Saudis see themselves as mediators between the Syrians and the Israelis, but they did see themselves as mediators between the Palestinians and the US (in the late 1970s, when they worked to achieve recognition of the PLO by the Washington administration), and over the last year, as mediators between the Palestinians and Israel. Their willingness, even if reluctant, to act as mediators in contacts between the Palestinians and Israel constitutes progress in Saudi diplomacy and the approach towards Israel. This willingness should be promoted sensitively and with an understanding of internal constraints that impact on Saudi activity and still prevent Saudi Arabia from agreeing to an open dialogue with Israel. The talks between Prince Bandar and the Israelis in 2006 were thus in one sense a direct continuation of the traditional fundamental Saudi stance that views the Palestinian problem as the nucleus of the Arab-Israeli conflict and in

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Internal Constraints on Dialogue with Israel

Despite the progress in the basic Saudi position, the Saudis refused to hold direct talks with Israel and played down any other involvement in advancing the Palestinian issue. In the 1980s commentators tended to associate this approach with Saudi concern over Palestinian terror elements that opposed a settlement with Israel. In line with this viewpoint, the commentators also tended to explain the financial aid that the Saudis gave to Palestinian elements as "buying security" to ensure the stability of the regime. Saudi concern over Palestinian terror was partially relevant to those years, but lost much of its significance after the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the Washington peace talks that followed, and later after the Oslo accords and direct peace talks between the Palestinians and Israelis in the second half of the 1990s. With the start of direct talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Saudis agreed to the US request and dispatched official representatives to the multilateral talks. Saudi princes, including Bandar, also displayed a willingness to meet with unofficial Israeli figures, as a show of good will and a means of building trust. Naturally, these meetings were not covered by the media.

Current Saudi concern that direct contacts with Israelis might be leaked to the press does not necessarily refer to the Palestinian or inter-Arab arena, but internal Saudi politics. This concern is influenced and motivated by three factors that characterize the internal code of the Saudi government and social structure:

1. *The importance of the religious establishment and the entrenched negative Wahhabi approach towards Jews.* The Saudi royal family sees the religious Wahhabi establishment as its strategic partner in government and a fundamental part of the ruling coalition. Thus the royal family is forced to consider the positions of this establishment, including its approach towards Israel and the Jews. There are a considerable number of members of the religious Wahhabi establishment who still consider contact with official Israeli elements as heresy at worst, but at the very least as undesirable policy. This opposition is augmented by opposition from radical religious groups (some of which support the messages of Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organization) that do not belong to the official religious establishment and tend to adopt the strict interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith with regard to the Jews. Over the years, these strict interpretations have radicalized the approaches among the religious Wahhabi establishment, whether based on conviction or as a defense against accusations of radical religious groups that doubted its religious sincerity and attacked it for what was presented as succumbing to the royal family.

2. *A conservative approach among large sectors of society.* In addition to the religious groups, some of which are partners in the ruling coalition while others are in opposition to the government, there is a wide range of groups with a conservative approach. These groups are conceptually close to the religious establishment or are influenced by it. They are present in all walks of society, from prominent business people (such as the al-Rajahi family that started out as a family of money changers and today owns an Islamic bank that has branches across the kingdom,

or other business people) to government employees, university lecturers, professionals who share the conservative approach, and members of the lower economic class. These groups adhere to the traditional standpoint of the Saudi society and view any challenge to this approach as a threat.

Therefore, the conservative groups are more exposed to and more influenced by the negative messages in the Qur'an against Jews than other elements in Saudi society. These messages, which are promulgated by religious establishment activists, present Jews and Israelis as elements that "defile" Islamic society. Over the years the Saudis prevented Jews with European and America passports from entering the country, claiming they represented a threat to the "purity" of Saudi Islamic society and the "purity" of Saudi soil. The American Aramco oil company, which stationed thousands of American and European employees in Saudi Arabia, collaborated with this approach of the Saudi government and did not employ Jews in Saudi Arabia. This general attitude bolstered the traditional negative Saudi approach towards Jews and Israel.

The taboo on Jews began to weaken when the Saudis were forced to meet US secretary of state Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. However, the taboo on recognition of Israel continued, theoretically until the Fahd initiative, which for the first time implied Saudi recognition of the State of Israel, and in practice up to the Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo accords. After the Oslo accords Saudi princes as well as representatives of various Saudi groups – businesspeople, journalists, students, and others – displayed a willingness to meet with Israelis and some even visited Israel privately to get a closer look at the business opportunities there.

3. *Power struggles in the royal family.* The royal family, which enjoys a monopoly on the government and strives to maintain this hold for the future, is reluctant to take any step that may generate opposition from the religious establishment and conservative elements in society. This is the main reason why over the years its policy was of a conservative nature. Moreover, various factions among the princes, aiming to advance one of their members to a key position in the royal family, maintain open channels of communication with all sectors of the population, especially the religious establishment. As a result, various princes – including those in leading positions – have desisted from direct and open contact with Israeli officials. Even Prince Bandar, who was involved in preliminary contacts toward the Madrid Peace Conference as well as the contacts ahead of and during the 2000 Camp David Summit, kept a low profile during these talks. It is therefore not surprising that his father, Crown Prince Sultan, who is also the minister of defense, denied the existence of meetings with official Israeli elements in 2006, partly to offset potential damage to Bandar's prospects of advancing in the government hierarchy.

The Chances of Open Dialogue with Israel

The Saudi system of government is based on a monopoly of the royal family in the government system and a strategic coalition with the religious establishment. This system has proven its efficiency in ensuring survival of the royal family's power over the last hundred years, but at the cost of a conservative domestic policy and a hesitant foreign policy. In recent years, the winds of change have begun to blow in Saudi society, and with them are increasing calls from within for more lib-

eralization in various walks of life. The royal family, which is united in its drive to maintain its hold on government, will have to respond to these demands for change. It will be compelled to reexamine its approach to its strategic partners in the ruling coalition, or alternately, to reach a sort of compromise with the religious establishment in order to contend with internal demands for change.

Since the terror attacks of September 2001 and especially since terror attacks began inside Saudi Arabia in May 2004, the religious establishment has been subjected to persistent political and public criticism. A prominent attack on the religious establishment was apparently initiated by elements within the royal family and conducted through the media, which is owned by various princes. This attack has three main focal points: the education system, women's rights, and the religion police. In these three areas, the religious establishment, at least in the last three decades, has blocked any move toward liberalization and modernization. Thus the public education system has been governed by the religious establishment since the 1970s, which prevented the system from training the younger generation to contend with modern life. It expanded areas of religious study and prevented the expansion of general studies. The education system, still led by the religious establishment, is now branded as responsible for encouraging xenophobia and for nurturing a hothouse for breeding terrorists. With regard to women's rights, the religious establishment is presented as spearheading the segregation of women in society and over the years intensifying limitations on women's freedom of action, which constrict large sections of the population, prevent their integration in the workforce, and contribute to the increase in the foreign

workforce in Saudi Arabia. The third focus of criticism, the religion police – which acts as the operational arm of the religious establishment's guidelines – oversees traditional and religious behavioral norms and adopts a hard line against any manifestation of liberalization, either in the education system or among women. In recent years, the religion police has withstood challenges designed to reduce its freedom of activity and influence in society.

These attacks on the religious establishment may shorten the octopus' tentacles but will not obliterate it. It is questionable how many in the royal family support an end to the ruling coalition with the religious establishment. On the other hand, however, many in the royal family believe that the expansion of the religious establishment since the early 1970s and its increased influence have damaged the kingdom. The latter are looking to reduce the influence of the religious establishment, both in domestic policy and foreign policy. It is still unclear if this attack on the religious establishment will result in a diminishing of the religious establishment's power or a compromise agreement with it. Under such a compromise the religious establishment may be persuaded to relinquish its monopolistic hold on certain areas in return for preserving its influence in others. It is not inconceivable that such a compromise agreement, if attained, would force the religious establishment to relinquish, even partially, its staunch objection to open and official contacts with Israel. This would be in return for what it views as even more important fundamental tenets – maintaining the religious and traditional values of Saudi society. By the same token, however, it is possible that a compromise agreement would include reservations about ties with


Israel, particularly open relations, in return for concessions forced on the religious establishment relating to domestic areas.

Conclusion

Despite an increase in Saudi willingness to adopt an active role in finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the kingdom still adheres to the viewpoint that the Palestinian problem – whose solution is the creation of an independent Palestinian state, with Arab Jerusalem as its capital – is the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The considerable upturn in the Saudi economy following the rise in oil prices in recent years and the decrease in the power of radical elements in the Arab world (Iraq, Syria) have not spurred Saudi Arabia to take on an independent and open role in solving the Palestinian problem, and it continues to search for inter-Arab support for King Abdullah's peace initiative, even if only from moderate states. Moreover, the rise in oil prices has hardened King Abdullah's bargaining stance further. He will likely condition his personal participation in President Bush's proposed peace conference on tangible outcomes regarding Palestinian issues. However, he may allow lower level participation in the conference (perhaps Prince Bandar) in order to avert a confrontation with the United States.

Saudi Arabia's specific regime structure – more precisely, the strategic ruling coalition between the royal family and the religious establishment – determines its shirking of a leadership role vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict. As long as this ruling coalition exists in its current format, and as long as the religious establishment maintains its policy of exclusion towards non-Islamic elements and its anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli messages, it is highly likely that

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the hesitant Saudi policy towards Israel will be maintained, including concern over open dialogue and extending areas of cooperation with it. This means there will not be an increase in cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel in areas of strategic importance, such as Iranian ambitions to obtain a nuclear capability or the situation in Iraq. However, sporadic and covert dialogue with Israel will continue on the Palestinian issue.

Extending political cooperation with Israel will become possible only if there is a change in the Saudi ruling coalition, which lessens the influence of the religious establishment on the government and society, and increases the influence of domestic forces looking to promote internal liberalization and greater openness towards non-Islamic elements and states.