

Saudi Arabia Engagement in Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

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During the last few decades Saudi Arabia had exercised a role of a regional coordinator between various Middle Eastern states and between them and the USA. Twice in the past it had put on the table a peace initiative that was aimed at finding an acceptable solution for Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and both times these initiatives didn't take off for various reasons. The reality of the Arab spring and Iran domination, as well as the rise of the crown-prince Muhammad Bin-Salman and Abraham accords had radically altered the regional dynamic, and during the last few years Saudi Arabia moved closer to Israel, especially since it became more preoccupied with Iranian threat and domestic reforms. How can Saudi Arabia facilitate peace or contribute for peace-making between Israel and Palestinians, openly or behind the scenes, and what needs to happen first to allow this scenario?

A. Introduction

Since mid-70-s Saudi Arabia had exercised a role of a regional coordinator between various Middle Eastern states and between them and the USA, competing with other middle eastern powers and looking for ways to establish its own position. Twice in the past it had put on the table a peace initiative that was aimed at finding an acceptable solution for Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and both times these initiatives didn't take off for various reasons. Saudi Arabia traditionally stood by the Palestinians and supported financially the PA and its institutions. The reality of the Arab spring and Iran domination, as well as the rise of the crown-prince Muhammad Bin-Salman and Abraham accords had radically altered the regional dynamics. During the last few years Saudi Arabia moved closer to Israel and further away from the Palestinians, it became more preoccupied with Iranian threat and domestic reforms and it seemed unable to present and pursue an independent policy on Israel and Palestine, while still aspiring to play a significant place in regional decision-making. How can Saudi Arabia facilitate peace or contribute for peace-making between Israel and Palestinians and what needs to happen first to allow this scenario?

B. Historical background

Two Peace Initiatives

The Arab Peace initiative (API) that was first presented by then Saudi crown prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz in 2002 is a well-known story that was widely covered and discussed,

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however Saudi Arabia's engagement in Arab Israeli peacemaking starts much earlier than API. On August 7, 1981, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz announced a plan for peace in the Middle East. It affirmed the right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 as well as the right of all states in the region to live in peace.

In 1982 Israel firmly rejected Fahd's initiative, claiming that it doesn't differ substantially from the traditional Arab position and the reference of PLO makes it impossible for Israel to embrace it. The Saudi leadership as well as its American allies continued to stick to Fahd's plan for a few years, until it was mostly forgotten.

After Fahd's plan it took the Saudis two more decades to initiate another plan based on solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in return for full Arab recognition and normalization with Israel.

In 2002, during the Arab Peace Summit in Beirut then crown prince Abdullah abd al-Aziz launched his peace initiative that was soon embraced by all Arab countries, and later by all Islamic countries during OIC conference in 2007. The Palestinians who depended on the Saudis for contributions, supported the API, while Israel never provided an official response to the initiative (vast majority of Israelis never heard of the Arab Peace Initiative).²

Regional Changes – Irrelevant of the API?

Jerusalem and Riyadh share common concerns regarding Iranian expansion and the withdrawal of US from the region, but it seems for now that the unresolved Palestinian issue will continue standing in the way of any attempt to bring the parties closer together.

20 years later all Arab states still officially support the API, but few of them decided to go ahead with normalization process regardless of progress made between Israel and Palestinians. In 2020 UAE, and then Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan signed peace treaties with Israel. Their actions drew harsh criticism on behalf of the Palestinians, as well as Iran, Turkey and some Arab countries. Saudi Arabia didn't join "the normalizers club", however, it was clear that without KSA's consent, the other Arab states would probably not opt for full recognition and normalization of relations with Israel.

Saudi Arabia still stands by 2002 plan and recently its representatives reaffirmed during a session in UN that the API is the basis for any further normalization between the countries.

Waiting with Normalization

Saudi Arabia traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, yet at the same time it feared the revolutionary dynamic of the PLO and its criticism of Arab monarchies. In the nineties, Riyadh mostly stayed away from Oslo accords dynamics, it didn't open a diplomatic office in Tel-Aviv as Qatar, Oman and other countries did. In 1993 newly established Palestinian Autonomy launched its embassy in Riyadh, however Saudi Arabia never opened its embassy in Ramallah. One of the reasons to this reluctance to promote bilateral Saudi-Palestinian ties was Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein during his invasion to Kuwait in 1990. Throughout the years it allocated millions of dollars to PA as financial aid, while some of its royals openly supported Islamic armed movements in Palestine, including HAMAS through charity funds and aid organizations.

² ["The Arab Peace Initiative at 15 Years,"](#) Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, July 2017.

Is Saudi Arabia able or willing to facilitate any dialogue or cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians to the benefit of all parties? For now, the country refrained from any concrete attempt to promote and implement the API so that it will transform from a theoretical concept to reality. What are the possible spheres where cooperation is possible and desirable? And what are the pitfalls that should be considered? How can Saudi Arabia, a traditional religious leader and a country with significant financial possibilities promote the moderate approach to future political compromise and peace making through its religious, political and economic institutions?

C. All roads lead to peace?

Saudi-Palestinian sulha is needed first

In May 2020 when Palestinians around the world mark Nakba (Catastrophe) day that symbolize the beginning of exile for many thousands of Palestinians from their homes, an internet campaign was waged in the Saudi segment of the internet. Saudi pro-governmental researches, pundits and influencers were posting posts that were critical of Palestinians and their leadership. Many used hashtags, such as “this is not my fight” (referring to Nakba) or “ungrateful Palestinians”. Later in fall, prince Bandar bin-Sultan, one of the most senior Saudi royals said in an interview to Al-Arabiya channel that Palestinian leaders were “cheats, liars and ungrateful”. It seemed as if Saudi leadership was trying to prepare the public opinion to the possibility of normalization with Israel, paving the way to public support through bashing the Palestinians. The Palestinians, and specifically the PA leadership accused the Gulf states, namely UAE and Saudi for “selling off the Palestinians and their struggle”.

A year later a Saudi ambassador to Jordan, Naef bin-Bandar as-Sudairi paid a public visit to Palestinian refugee camp Wahdat in Amman as what was described by some Palestinian political analysts as the first step to defrost the relations between the two parties.

If Saudi Arabia will promote any projects designed to improve the state of relations between Israel and the PA, the thick ice that accumulated in the relations between Riyadh and Ramallah, should be melted first. The visit of the Saudi ambassador to Wahdat refugee camp is a positive move, but it's just the first step in the long road to reconciliation. As of today, the Palestinians are still very wary of Emiratis, Bahrainis and Saudis, even if the latter didn't proceed with establishing formal relations with Israel. If the Palestinian side will feel that the Saudis approach them only to whitewash their cooperation with Israel, the likelihood of their participation will remain extremely low.

Saudi-led multi-lateral peace conference – phantom or reality?

Back in 2016, when Benjamin Netanyahu was desperately seeking another partner to join his 61-fingers coalition, he and MK Yitzhak Herzog, the head of the Zionist Union faction in the Knesset, discussed a regional peace plan that included embrace of the Arab Peace Initiative and renewal of negotiations with Palestinians. This initiative was proposed to Netanyahu during a February 2016 secretive meeting in Aqaba by foreign secretary John Kerry. Later John Kerry met Netanyahu in Rome and proposed to arrange a regional conference that will be attended by the heads of the Arab Sunni states, such as Egypt and Jordan, as well as Saudi Arabia and UAE.

This initiative never materialized as Netanyahu decided to include a right-wing party Israel Beytenu in his coalition instead of center-left Zionist Union. The PM eventually took a right turn and buried the idea of negotiations with Palestinians. In 2020 he promoted the idea of West Bank annexation, and then dropped it for the sake of signing a peace agreement with UAE and Bahrain (and later with Morocco and Sudan). Also, Yair Lapid, today a minister of foreign affairs, had mentioned favorably the idea of regional peace conference that will include the Saudis or even be led by them.

As the fight for primacy in the Middle East between Arab and non-Arab powers is ongoing, Saudi Arabia might be interested in hosting and arranging such an event that will relaunch the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, **but only in case if its success will be guaranteed**. A failure of such an initiative will further distance the Saudis from Israel and support the bias of the radical camp in KSA and other countries. Currently, when the coalition of right, center, left and the Arabs in Israel is shaky and the influence of PA keeps diminishing, the possibility of arranging such an event in the near future is doubtful. The leadership might change soon in Ramallah, also a political change in Jerusalem is always possible. Until both parties will have enough support at home for this move (or become desperate enough to risk it), it's hard to imagine this initiative coming to live.

Nevertheless, in the future this kind of scenario might enable all parties to benefit: the Saudis will get a place at the negotiation table, the Israelis will win the recognition of Riyadh and the Palestinians will enjoy the economic benefits, aid and renewal of negotiations.

Economy, ecology and academy

The crown prince Muhammad Bin-Salman has ambitious plans for his country. He wants to turn Riyadh and Jeddah into regional and international technological and business hubs, and the futuristic city of Neom grows fast despite the complications caused by the outbreak of coronavirus. He is dreaming of Saudization of the work force, but as of today Saudi Arabia still needs a lot of working hands and bright heads to make this transformation happen.

Well-educated Palestinian professionals always worked in the kingdom, but due to recent tensions as well as a few cases in which Palestinians were involved with HAMAS or Muslim Brotherhood and ended in Saudi jails had significantly diminished their numbers in KSA. Joint Israeli-Palestinian-Saudi projects aimed at "green" urban development, cleantech and protection of environment in the region might produce the necessary cohesion and synergy without causing the inevitable uproar on the Palestinian side. Saudi investment in Palestinian-Israeli startups will provide another connection between the younger generation who today mainly exist in parallel worlds, never meeting or interacting with each other. The creation of QIZ (Qualified Industrial Zones) mechanism, similar to one that was created by the USA for the sake of promotion of cooperation between Israel, Jordan and Egypt, might be useful. The QIZ initiative allows Egypt and Jordan to export products to the United States duty-free, as long as these products contain inputs from Israel. Saudi Arabia may offer similar privileges for Palestinian and Israeli companies to boost cooperation to follow-up some political developments on the ground (currently, it's hard to imagine a direct Saudi involvement with Israeli businesses, even if the purpose of it is to help the Palestinians or to boost cooperation)

In regards to opportunities in academic sphere, they are quite limited as of today, since there are no diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, while the Palestinian universities are off limits for both Saudis, Emiratis or Bahrain due to increased animosity caused by Abrahamic accords that were largely rejected by the Palestinian society.

However, academic collaborations that do not need actual meetings or student exchanges are actually possible, especially if they will be initiated by a fourth party – a Western university, especially in scientific and technological fields.

One aspect of regional relations is particularly important today: ecology. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has launched a comprehensive national development strategy to support the diversification of energy sources to achieve the goal of increasing the use of renewable energy. Cooperation with Israel, Palestine and probably Jordan in this sphere might be better accepted by Saudi society, as it fits well the “Green initiative” that is meant to protect the environment and the ecological balance for the sake of future generations.

It's important to keep in mind that the idea of “economic peace” is rejected by the Palestinians, and if these initiatives will happen without any prospect of political progress, they will die before being born or draw sharp criticism in the PA.

Culture, religion and society

A few years ago, when some Israeli and American officials implied that Riyadh might take over Jordan's role as the guardian of the holy Muslim places in Jerusalem, the reaction in PA was extremely negative and suspicious. Not that Jordan that normalized relations with Israel in 1994 is very popular among the Palestinians today, but Saudi Arabia was considered to be a hostile and anti-Palestinian and the statements of the crown prince Muhammad Bin-Salman regarding possible compromise in Jerusalem just further strengthened their bias. After 2020 elections in US the rumors about Riyadh pushing out Amman from Jerusalem had stopped, but the suspicions remained. Therefore, any move in religious sphere made by Saudis will probably draw a wave of criticism, especially since in the past Saudi donations and contributions to mosques across the Middle East had ignited a wave of radicalization. It can of course, promote its moderate image through inter-religious dialogue (something that is happening already for the last few years), although it seems that the current Saudi leadership is also uninterested in promoting its soft power via preachers, minbars and mosques.

As of today, Saudi Arabia is going through massive transformation and liberalization of its religious, cultural and social sphere, due to series of reforms introduced by the crown prince Muhammad Bin-Salman. Once an ultraconservative and suffocating place, Saudi Arabia is opening up to the tourists, displays its historical, pre-Islamic antiquities (such as Al-Ula) and fights with Dubai for primacy in business, sport shows, book fairs and film festivals. It remains to be seen how the Saudis can involve both Israelis and Palestinians in various project in sphere of culture, but there is no doubt that the Saudi facelift attracts both Israelis and Palestinians. Without making the grand move, such as recognizing Israel or signing a peace treaty with it, Saudi Arabia can engage Israelis and Palestinians in its large book fairs, initiate tele-bridges (as was done in Soviet Union during the Perestroika when people from Soviet Union and USA were first brought together) and promote other similar activities. The Saudi World Muslim League had undertaken a trip to Aushwitz in 2019 and it is already active in promoting the “wasatiya” (moderation) in Muslim societies abroad.

D. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is currently looking for its place in the regional system where new, bold actors, such as neighboring Dubai operate fast and change facts on the ground. It has to decide, whether it's interested to play a role in bringing the Israelis and the Palestinians closer together in order to stabilize the system and avoid another dangerous spiral of violence. If it

will choose to do so, it will have to improvise and take risks, which seems to fit the current mood of its young leadership. It can start with taking the “baby steps” in various fields – from allowing joint academic researches with other companies, to economic initiatives that will boost Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, such as the QIZ mechanism. Saudi Arabia can use its religious influence to promote “wasatiya” (moderation), and it already does so today through its World Muslim League.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia as a regional heavy weight, cannot risk failure. It will get involved if it can benefit from the process and if the necessary guaranties are provided, something that will be difficult to achieve in today’s unstable regional climate. Currently it might concentrate on smaller steps behind the scenes in order to improve the chances for peace building in the future.