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Saudi Religious Diplomacy Targets Jerusalem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A United Arab Emirates-backed Saudi effort to wrest control from Jordan of Islam's holy places in Jerusalem signals a sharper, more overt edge to Saudi religious diplomacy. The kingdom's quest for regional hegemony risks deepening divides in the Muslim world.

The Saudi effort to take control of Islam's holy places in Jerusalem serves, among other things, to support President Donald Trump's plan for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a plan that has split the Muslim world even before it has officially been made public, and that has been clouded by Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

At the very least, Saudi Arabia hopes – at the risk of destabilizing Jordan, where Palestinians account for at least half the country's almost ten million people – to drop its resistance to the Trump initiative.

Riyadh's and the UAE's focus on Jerusalem has broad regional implications as they are battling Turkey for ownership of the Jerusalem issue. Both countries have tried to downplay the significance of [two Islamic summits in Istanbul convened by Turkey](#) to counter Trump's moving of the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Turkey and the Gulf states are also at odds over the Saudi-UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar and policy towards Iran.

The power- and geopolitics-driven effort constitutes a marked shift in Saudi religious diplomacy, which, for much of the past four decades, involved a \$100 billion public diplomacy campaign to globally promote Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism. More recently, Saudi Arabia has sought to project itself as a beacon of tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and an unidentified form of moderate Islam.

Riyadh has not officially announced its quest to wrest control from Jordan of the Temple Mount, home to the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third most holy site after Mecca and Medina, but evidence is piling up against a backdrop of ever closer relations among Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain.

Flexing the kingdom's financial muscle, Saudi King Salman told an Arab summit in Dhahran in April that he was [donating \\$150 million to support Islam's holy places](#) in Jerusalem. The donation counters a multitude of [Turkish bequests to Islamic organizations in Jerusalem](#) and efforts to acquire real estate.

But unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey can capitalize on the fact that it maintains diplomatic relations with Israel to organize Islamist tours to the city. Thousands of Turkish supporters of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) visited the city in the past year. Turkish activists allegedly participated in last year's protests on the Temple Mount.

Striking a different chord from that of his powerful son, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who has been vocal in his support for Trump and his [empathy with Israeli positions](#), King Salman denounced the "invalidity and illegality" of the US decision to recognize Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia, in opposition to the Jordanian endowment that administers the Temple Mount, last year [backed Israel's installation of metal detectors](#) following an attack that killed two Israeli policemen.

Some Jordanians saw the Saudi support as a precursor to a US-backed agreement with Israel that would give the Gulf states a foothold on the Temple Mount by allowing Saudi and UAE personnel to be posted at its entrances.

According to [Kamal Khatib, an Israeli Arab Islamist leader](#), as well as [Arab media reports](#), the UAE – in competition with Turkey – is seeking to purchase real estate adjacent to the Temple Mount. Khatib asserted that the UAE is operating through an associate of Muhammad Dahlan, an Abu Dhabi-based former Palestinian security chief with presidential ambitions.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia clashed in December during a gathering of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union when the kingdom attempted to challenge Jordan's custodianship of holy places in Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia, together with the UAE and Kuwait, [pledged US\\$2.5 billion to Jordan](#) after mass anti-government protests rocked the country earlier this year in a bid to gain leverage and prevent it from turning to Turkey for help.

Al-Monitor quoted Raed Daana, a former director of preaching and guidance at Al-Aqsa Mosque Directorate, as saying that [Saudi Arabia had secretly invited Palestinian Muslim dignitaries](#) in a bid to garner support for a Saudi power grab.

Saudi officials are further believed to be pressuring Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to allow Saudi Islamic scholars to visit Palestine. In a rare outreach, Iyad Madani, a Saudi national and secretary-general of the Jeddah-based, 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), [visited the Temple Mount in January](#).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have used Bahrain, a financially weak state whose ruling family was bolstered in 2011 by the intervention of a Saudi-led military force to counter a popular revolt, as a front for some of their overtures towards Israel.

Bahrain, which recently granted entry to an Israeli delegation to participate in a UNESCO meeting, has been at the forefront of the Gulf states' religious diplomacy and propagation of interfaith dialogue.

Israel's only official presence in the Gulf is its under-the-radar mission to the International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi, which is widely seen as the Jewish state's embassy to the region.

A prominent American rabbi, Marc Shneier, and evangelist Reverend Johnnie Moore, a member of Donald Trump's faith advisory board, [keynoted at a dinner in Washington](#) in May hosted by the Bahrain Embassy. Reverend Moore led a delegation of Bahraini and expatriate civic and business leaders on a visit to Israel last December, days after Trump had recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state.

The delegation's Palestinian reception suggests that Saudi-UAE efforts to gain a geopolitics-driven religious foothold in Jerusalem may not be straightforward. Palestinian guards [barred the delegation from entering the Temple Mount](#) while protesters in Gaza [blocked it from visiting the Strip](#).

Said Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) executive committee member Hanan Ashrawi in a comment about the visit that could have applied to the broader Saudi-UAE effort: "I don't believe this whole lovey-dovey approach of 'we're here to show tolerance'. Then [go home and show tolerance at home](#)."

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