



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Politics, America, and Culture: Behind Saudi Arabia's Hesitation

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,839, December 6, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The official Saudi denial of a meeting between Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu proves that the meeting did not produce the result Netanyahu had hoped for. Riyadh does not yet see sufficient reason to make the groundbreaking change of open and normalized relations with Jerusalem.

Many are puzzled by the Saudi reluctance to join the peace train and normalize relations with Israel. It is clear, after all, that Riyadh gave the green light to the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan to advance their relations with Israel to the maximum possible degree. Saudi Arabia has opened its airspace to Israeli aviation, which in itself is a step toward normalization. Yet despite all this, the meeting held on the night of November 22 between the Israeli PM and the Saudi Crown Prince did not yield the expected results. The proof is the official Saudi denial that the meeting even took place. The global publicity surrounding the meeting embarrassed the Saudis and does not work in Israel's favor.

The question of why Riyadh is hesitant is even more pressing against the backdrop of a US administration that will change in under two months. With an imminent shift in US policy and Saudi reluctance to move forward toward normalization, the efforts of other countries—the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Israel—to create a new political reality that represents a kind of anti-Iranian regional alliance might be at risk of being undone.

There are several explanations for Riyadh's hesitation. The most important is the kingdom's fear of Iran and its possible reaction to a Saudi rapprochement with Israel. The Saudis well remember the night in September 2019 when Iran (through its proxies in Yemen and Iraq) attacked

vital oil facilities and shut them down for a long time. The Saudis also remember that no one, including the US and Israel, responded to this attack. They concluded from this that they are alone in the battle against Iran and that power relations are not in their favor.

A second reason for Saudi hesitation is their fear of the Biden administration, and this concern is divided into several sub-reasons.

First, the new US administration is expected to try to get closer to Tehran by lifting sanctions and returning to the nuclear deal, steps that will revive Iran's economy and bolster its efforts to fuel the Houthi struggle against Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Second, the Biden administration, unlike its predecessor, will once again view the kingdom through the lens of human rights and will raise embarrassing questions about the Khashoggi affair, executions, and rights of foreign workers in the kingdom. Washington's support for Riyadh will be grudging and limited, and it is highly doubtful that Biden and his government will allow Israel to warm its relations with a country about which they have reservations. The Biden administration is also expected to bring the Palestinian issue to the forefront and will resist any Arab progress with Israel that does not take Palestinian wishes into account. The Americans might, in fact, insist on a return to the 2002 Saudi-Arab peace plan as a condition for any progress toward peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The third reason for Saudi hesitation is the internal situation in the kingdom. The Western world and Israel see the kingdom and its conduct mainly through the words and actions of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, and especially through the reforms he has led: cuts in the powers and budgets of the "moral police"; permission for women to drive and move about in public without a male escort and even without a head covering; the 2030 plan, which is designed to send Saudi Arabia forth into an oil-free future; and the proposed establishment of the "City of the Future."

But there are other important elements at play in Saudi Arabia that have not been taken sufficiently into account. First and foremost is the status of the Crown Prince. Ever since he was appointed heir to the throne in June 2017 he has been the subject of much resentment among the royal family. When he was appointed, he was only 32 years old—very young compared to the previous heirs, King Salman's brothers, who are much older than he is. In traditional Saudi society, age is a major factor in considering whether to appoint a person to an important public office. Appointing a young person while bypassing older adults is considered illegitimate.

Another drawback is the inexperience of the Crown Prince at managing organizations and policies. This deficiency further stains him in comparison to the other previous heirs, who were ministers, ambassadors, army commanders, and executives of giant corporations. They are considered by some in the kingdom to be much better suited to run a state and set policy.

Bin Salman's opponents spoke out against him day and night from the moment of his accession, and he knew very well who was saying what. In November 2017, six months after he was appointed heir to the throne, he arrested dozens of his cousins—members of the royal family—and detained them at the Ritz-Carlton Riyadh, where he extorted billions of dollars from them and even had two of them killed. These family members have neither forgotten nor forgiven him for this humiliation.

Many in the royal family blame the Crown Prince for the deep Saudi involvement in Yemen and the bloody price the kingdom is paying for that involvement. Many blame him for the fiasco of the murder of the exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018 and the dire consequences of that affair in terms of Riyadh's image and its foreign relations with the US and Turkey.

The reforms to the status of women introduced by bin Salman are also not to the liking of many in the kingdom, though a large majority of young people support them. Thus the likelihood that he will be the next King of Saudi Arabia is not 100%. Official bodies refer to bin Salman as regent (i.e., the next king), but this is by no means guaranteed.

Another reason for Saudi hesitation is cultural. In the Bedouin heritage of the kingdom, there is a rule in the Hadith (the Islamic oral law): "Nothing happens in the desert, so nothing is urgent." In other words, it is better to wait and see what will happen than risk taking action that could be dangerous. This position is deeply rooted in the way of thinking and behaving in traditional societies in the Middle East, and Westerners—who espouse an opposite culture of "instant" and "now" (like, for example, the Israeli group "Peace Now")—do not sufficiently appreciate the depth to which hesitation is a cultural trait in Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh is reluctant to advance its relations with Jerusalem due to a variety of internal, external, and cultural factors. Only a very strong reason will change this, and I do not see such a reason at present.

This is an edited version of an article published in Makor Rishon on November 24, 2020.

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