

## Saudi Arabia as a Peace Peddler? The Limits of Riyadh's Influence over Israeli–Palestinian Diplomacy

by Jørgen Jensehaugen

Renewed talk and anticipation of Trump's so-called "ultimate deal" for Israeli–Palestinian peace is a reoccurring theme in the media. While doubts persist as to the imminent unveiling of a Trump plan, it is clear that a key dimension of his approach rests on the role of Saudi Arabia as a partner, and a potential peace peddler. This is a highly problematic and erroneous assumption by the Trump team.

Saudi Arabia has no direct stake in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The kingdom does not border the Palestinian territories, and while Jerusalem is of large symbolic importance to Saudi Arabia it is Jordan which represents the Islamic *waqf* of the *Haram al-sharif*. Despite this, Saudi Arabia has been engaged in the conflict as a middle man due to its combined alliance with the United States, its massive oil wealth and its prominent position in the Arab world. This role is not new, but it is one which has few successes to show for.

President Trump and his special advisor Jared Kushner's close relationship with Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman is only the most recent example of this function. Much like previous examples it is highly doubtful whether the Saudi role in the now defunct "peace process" will be what makes Trump's peace plan viable.

In 1973, in response to the US decision to resupply Israel with arms during the Yom Kippur war, Arab oil producing states, chief among which stood Libya and Saudi Arabia, instituted an oil embargo against the US and other countries backing Israel during the war. This shocked US decision-makers into realising that Arab interests had to be taken seriously. In the years that followed Saudi Arabia became a go-to country for US policy-makers.

In the early phases of President Jimmy Carter's intense peace negotiations, which culminated in the Egyptian–

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Israeli peace of 1979, President Carter used Saudi Arabia as a back-channel mediator between the United States and the PLO.<sup>1</sup> At the time the US refused to engage directly with the PLO until the PLO accepted UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 242, but having no direct channels to the PLO it was difficult for the US to mediate such an acceptance. The Carter team, like the subsequent Reagan one, hoped that Saudi Arabia could deliver not only on moderating the PLO itself, but also on moderating the Arab confrontation states.

Carter was disappointed – Saudi Arabia simply lacked the ability to influence the PLO at this time and it would take another decade before the PLO accepted UNSC Resolution 242 and the US could open direct contact with the organisation. In the end it was not Saudi Arabia which made the PLO change its stance, but rather developments within the Palestinian national movement.

The most famous example of Saudi peace promotion is the Arab peace initiative of 2002, and its precursor the 1981 Fahd plan.<sup>2</sup> Tellingly, the Arab peace initiative is often referred to as the Saudi initiative. As an Arab initiative, supported by the Arab League, it is remarkable in its moderation. It calls for a two-state solution based on Israeli withdrawal

to the 1967 lines, the establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem and a “just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194”. In return, all the Arab states vowed to establish peaceful normalised relations with Israel. The initiative was thus in line with all the UN parameters of how the conflict should be solved.

In theory this was what Israel had been calling for since 1948, apart from the point on the Palestinian refugees. The peace initiative was re-endorsed by the Arab League in 2007 and 2017. Israel, however, has never accepted the Arab peace initiative and it has thus been shelved, like so many peace proposals before it. As it turned out Saudi Arabia had no real leverage vis-à-vis Israel, and as long as Israel refused to accept the proposal there was little the kingdom could do other than re-endorse it at regular intervals.

In February 2007, Saudi Arabia also made an attempt at intra-Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The resulting 2007 Mecca agreement set out to stop the violence between the two groups and establish a Palestinian national unity government.<sup>3</sup> What looked like an initial success, with the establishment of such a Palestinian government on 17 March 2007, unravelled three months later. Since then the two parties have been at loggerheads.

<sup>1</sup> Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter. The U.S., Israel and the Palestinians*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Arab peace initiative adopted at the Arab League summit in Beirut on 28 March 2002, <https://gu.com/p/ktth>; Fahd Plan, 7 August 1981, <https://uniteapps.un.org/dpa/dpr/unispal.nsf/0/5FB09709F4050B8985256CED007390D8>.

<sup>3</sup> Mecca agreement, 8 February 2007, [https://ecf.org.il/media\\_items/1197](https://ecf.org.il/media_items/1197).

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These examples raise the question: does Saudi Arabia really carry the type of influence towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict its wealth and regional gravitas suggests?

While there is no doubt that Saudi Arabia is a significant regional actor, it is highly questionable whether this translates into it being an important player in the Israeli–Palestinian arena. While the fault of the diplomatic failings listed above clearly does not lie with Saudi Arabia as such, what is interesting is the insistence of the United States that Saudi Arabia can act as a peace peddler despite evidence to the contrary.

Notwithstanding all the differences between Trump and Carter, one thing they have in common is that they are attempting to solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict without negotiating with the Palestinians. Instead they have insisted on using the Saudis to act on their behalf. The Saudis have been willing to take on this role because it is a cheap way to strengthen ties with Washington. This US policy of side-lining the Palestinians in the diplomacy of the Arab–Israeli conflict is a longstanding US tradition.<sup>4</sup> The past two decades has been the exception.

We know very little about the exact content of Trump's "ultimate deal" apart from his decision to take Jerusalem

"off the table", having given it to Israel, and his decision to defund UNRWA, attempting to also take the Palestinian refugee issue off the table. Based on this alone it is blatantly obvious that the Palestinians will reject the deal.

The Trump administration has not even talked to the Palestinian leadership since its Jerusalem declaration in December 2017. This declaration set off a negative spiral of events in which the PLO broke contact with the US administration to which Trump responded vindictively by closing the PLO office in Washington. This means that not only is there no line of communication, but the formal structures for reopening communication have been removed. In essence, then, Saudi Arabia has been handed the task of being the Palestinian proxy vis-à-vis the United States. In this, they are being asked to shove the Trump plan down the throat of Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority. The idea being that if we cannot sell our peace proposal to the Palestinians, we can sell it to the Saudis to sell it to the Palestinians.

This is not only difficult because the Palestinians insist that they must represent themselves, but also because the Saudis are a house divided. In a famous interview in *The Atlantic* the current Saudi (*de facto*) leader Mohammed bin Salman supported Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state. His only *quid pro quo* was vague: "We have religious concerns about the fate of the holy mosque in Jerusalem and about the rights of the Palestinian people."<sup>5</sup> He later added that

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine. Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, Updated ed., Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001; Jørgen Jensehaugen, "The Fatal Flaw in Trump's Plan for Middle East Peace", in *The Washington Post*, 24 July 2018, <https://wapo.st/2LHNEcm>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's

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the Palestinians should agree to discuss Trump's proposal or "shut up".<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Crown Prince, Saudi King Salman has reassured the Palestinians that the kingdom continues to support the Palestinian position.<sup>7</sup>

While Trump's peace plan lacks credibility – if it is ever made public – the question of the Saudi position is intriguing, and increasingly so after the Khashoggi murder has made the kingdom less palatable to many US decision-makers. Will Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman play the part which the White House expects of them, that is pressure the Palestinians to accept the proposal, or will the kingdom once again push its own initiative from 2002?

The first option will please the United States but ensure a break with the Palestinians, whilst the second will be supported by the Palestinian but create friction with the US. Either way, and once again, it is not in Riyadh that peace is made. It will have to be made in Jerusalem with the active participation of the Palestinians.

9 January 2019

Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good', in *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036>.

<sup>6</sup> Barak Ravid, "Saudi Crown Prince: Palestinians Should Take What the U.S. Offers", in *Axios*, 29 April 2018, <https://www.axios.com/1525025098-e7f0faf8-4f3f-442c-8478-6737ddb5a553.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Kalin, "As U.S. Pushes for Mideast Peace, Saudi King Reassures Allies", in *Reuters*, 29 July 2018, <https://reut.rs/2NUOaom>.

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