

# MbS and Saudi Arabia's Israel Policy: What Can We Expect from the New Prime Minister?

by [Aziz Alghashian \(/experts/aziz-alghashian\)](#)

Nov 7, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/syast-mhmd-bn-slman-walmmlkt-tjah-asrayl-madha-ntwq-mn-ryys-alwzra-aljdyd\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Aziz Alghashian \(/experts/aziz-alghashian\)](#)

Aziz Alghashian is a researcher on Saudi foreign policy towards Israel and a Fellow at the SEPAD Project. He obtained a PhD from the University of Essex.



Brief Analysis

## As Prime Minister, MbS won't throw out the Arab Peace Initiative altogether, but he will likely reframe it.

On September 27, the young crown prince, Mohamad bin Salman (MbS) formalized his tacit role of de facto Saudi leader by becoming the official Prime Minister of the Saudi kingdom. The last time such a significant move occurred was during the era of King Saud, when King Faisal briefly occupied the position, only to be removed not long after. With the crown prince already leading the country's socio-economic reforms, the question remains as to whether his ascent means anything fundamentally different in Saudi trajectory for foreign policy. Specifically, some observers have wondered whether this may signal a shift in the Kingdom's attitude towards normalizing relations with Israel.

While the quick answer to both questions is no, the current shift may nevertheless have meaningful implications for the current and future state of Saudi-Israeli relations. Riyadh's refusal to jump on the Abraham Accords bandwagon was not merely a personal preference of King Salman, instead reflecting a longstanding and complicated Saudi foreign policy. In line with his predecessors, King Salman has championed the Arab Peace Initiative (API) as a condition for Saudi-Israeli normalization.

### Focus on Internal Policy

Given this long-standing policy, it is unlikely that MbS is simply waiting for the post-Salman era to normalize with Israel via the mechanism of the Abraham Accords. Instead, MbS's focus on change is likely to continue to be directed towards the kingdom's current efforts to enact massive domestic socio-economic reforms. These efforts involve the restructuring of bureaucracies, digitizing and centralizing government-to-people interactions. They have also included relaxation of social restrictions, especially around entertainment. The current images of pop stars singing "bring your girlfriends and meet me at the hotel room" were unimaginable not too long ago. This was especially the case when King Salman was governor of Riyadh, where he represented a conservative dynasty of governance for the

capital.

The crown prince's desire to maintain Saudi spending power within the Saudi economy necessitates such reforms. In [his interview with The Atlantic \(https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617738\)](https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617738), the crown prince said "if I'm going to get the employment rate down, and tourism could create one million jobs in Saudi Arabia, that means if I can keep \$30 billion from leaving Saudi Arabia, and most of it stays in Saudi Arabia, so Saudis don't travel as much as they do, that means, I have to do it [easing of entertainment restrictions]"

What this also suggests is that the current king has entrusted the young crown prince with a shared vision for a new economy as a tourist and investment destination. Such reforms, still viewed suspiciously by some in the kingdom—though largely supported by the kingdom's youth population—are occurring because they received the blessing of King Salman.

The current crown prince is now ruling (but not reigning yet) over an ambitious Saudi economy, while simultaneously balancing a foreign policy with myriad moving parts that is harder to control. Though domestic legitimacy is more important than external legitimacy for Saudi Arabia, the former is actually easier to manage than the latter. Still, external legitimacy within a broader Arab and Muslim public is still important and not something the current crown prince wants to treat too lightly. These moving parts and willingness to maintain external legitimacy speaks to the constraints of MbS normalizing relations with Israel outside the framework of the API.

### **The API Remains the Saudi Standard**

Given the milestone of the Abraham Accords and the changing regional landscape of Arab-Israeli relations—not least Saudi-Israeli thawing of relations—some have considered the API obsolete. Yet at least for Saudi Arabia, such a notion is far from the truth. There are no real signs that MbS plans on abandoning the API anytime soon.

However, with the ascent of MbS to the position of prime minister, MbS can add his own stamp to the API and, in turn, re-frame the narrative of how a potential relationship with Israel might be consistent with its principles. Notwithstanding the twenty years since Saudi Arabia initially proposed the API, the initiative has never been withdrawn from the table. Externally, Saudi Arabia's approach to the API often seems to be misunderstood, especially when it comes to how the initiative's language designed it to function in the whirlwind of Arab-Israeli relations.

What the API is not is a mandate, or what some in Israel have labeled as a 'take-it-or-leave-it' initiative. Rather, the API is an initiative designed with deliberately flexible language that implicitly encourages negotiations on different levels. As the late foreign minister, Prince Saud-Al-Faisal, said, the strength of the API actually lies in that it avoids too many details. While this was intended for an interpretive process between Arabs and Israelis, MbS's accent suggests this inherent flexibility within the API is an opportunity for him to flesh out implicit language with more explicit incentivizing discourse towards Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs alike. One example is the way in which the API's main aim is articulated: the achievement of a "just solution" to the conflict. Yet what comprises a just solution and how to reach it is left deliberately open for interpretation.

One way this could happen is perhaps by linking the API with the regional principles of vision 2030. Saudi Arabia is not only pushing for a diverse economy, but it is also pushing for a prosperous economic region. MbS realized that a lack of prosperity is a gateway for insecurity to ensue. Be it in Iraq, Yemen, or Palestine, insecurity obstructs the maximization of the region's economic potential. Therefore, we are witnessing Saudi leaning towards more regional integration, but core issues and grievances must be addressed first, and the Palestinian question is among them.

Such an interest is clear in MbS's statement in the Jeddah summit when he claimed "the prosperity and well-being of the region require accelerating finding comprehensive a just solution for the Palestinian issue in accordance with the principles and resolutions of the international legitimacy and the Arab Peace Initiative." As such, the new

position of MbS as prime minister should not be thought of as a prelude of Saudi circumnavigation of the Palestinian issue. Instead, this new role can be understood as an opportunity to re-frame and explicitly flesh out the API with more incentivized language that can then nudge Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arab states towards a settlement. ❖

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran's Oil Exports Are Vulnerable to Sanctions](#)

Nov 9, 2022



Henry Rome

[\(/policy-analysis/irans-oil-exports-are-vulnerable-sanctions\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [In 2022 Polls, Views on U.S. Relations On Par with Other World Powers in the Middle East](#)

Nov 9, 2022



Frances McDonough

[\(/policy-analysis/2022-polls-views-us-relations-par-other-world-powers-middle-east\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [The Future of al-Jawlani's Pragmatism in Idlib and Afrin](#)

Nov 8, 2022



Yilmaz Saeed

(/policy-analysis/future-al-jawlanis-pragmatism-idlib-and-afrin)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

Middle East (/policy-analysis/middle-east)