

New Saudi Views of Jews—and of Israel

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Brief Analysis

Several weeks ago, I related some general observations from my July trip to Saudi Arabia, in a post titled “ [Seeing Saudi Changes Up Close: A Week’s Worth of Surprises](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/seeing-saudi-changes-up-close-a-weeks-worth-of-surprises)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/seeing-saudi-changes-up-close-a-weeks-worth-of-surprises>).” In this post, I will focus more sharply on specific shifts in the attitudes of at least some influential Saudis toward Israel, as well as toward Jews more broadly. While much current coverage of Saudi Arabia is centered, with reason, on its continuing authoritarian politics, economic missteps, or military misadventures, some significant and potentially more positive social and cultural developments are also striking.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD ISRAEL

Saudi fear of Iran’s increasing influence, as well as dismay at past American inaction on the issue, have produced a real and positive change in many Saudis’ perceptions of Israel. For example, during a conference in Riyadh focused on the crisis in Syria, I made the point that Israel shares some Arab states’ interest in limiting Iran’s reach there—and is actually doing something about it. Most of the Saudi participants, including two members of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council of the Saudi royal government) nodded in agreement. Some told me afterward that they personally supported this once taboo proposition.

That does not mean this notion met with no resistance at all: indeed, another participant and council member spoke up, charging that “Israel is and will always be the enemy, and we cannot talk about common strategic interests between the Arab world and Israel.” Nonetheless, he did not claim that no such common interests exist. Moreover, his was the only decidedly anti-Israeli opinion I encountered during my week in Riyadh. In fact, most of the Saudi research professionals I spoke to, especially among the younger generation, now seem to have fairly nuanced opinions of Israel, viewing it through a relatively pragmatic lens rather than an ideological or religious one.

Changing views on the issue are also visible in recent Saudi official statements and media, with some apparent ebb and flow of publicly acceptable attitudes toward Israel. One Saudi acquaintance, who published a highly popular blog post praising Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) last fall, wrote another one praising Israel not long

afterward—and promptly lost his job at a research center. And while MbS himself expressed some sympathy for Israel in an April interview in the *Atlantic*, a month later his father, King Salman, took a different tone. The monarch vocally decried the U.S. embassy opening in Jerusalem and voiced “priority” support for the Palestinian cause.

Most recently, the pendulum seems to be swinging back again toward some open appreciation of shared interests with Israel. For example, a noteworthy September 5 [column](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/09/05/Israel-s-threat-and-the-birth-of-Baghdad-s-government.html)

[\(<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/09/05/Israel-s-threat-and-the-birth-of-Baghdad-s-government.html>\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/09/05/Israel-s-threat-and-the-birth-of-Baghdad-s-government.html) by leading pundit Abdurrahman al-Rashed, published in both Arabic and English in top Saudi media, credited Israel with helping to contain Iran not just in Syria, but in Iraq as well. During the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) in August, the chief Saudi religious authority, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, issued a truly remarkable statement that castigated Iran for obstructing Muslim pilgrims while noting that Israel places no such obstacles in their path. The latest U.S. aid cuts to UNRWA and other Palestinian agencies have produced barely a peep of Saudi protest, in sharp contrast to the angry official rhetoric from Egypt and Jordan (and, in a stunning display of hypocrisy, from Iran). Interestingly, Saudi English-language media, like the daily *Arab News*, is more likely to feature pro-Palestinian news coverage and commentary these days than do their more influential Arabic-language equivalents.

This anecdotal and media evidence of a shift in perspective is supported by hard data from three reliable public opinion polls I have conducted in Saudi Arabia in the past three years, through personal interviews conducted by locals among representative samples of 1,000 Saudi citizens. Solid majorities of the Saudi public favor a “two-state solution” for the Arab-Israeli conflict, including peace between Israel and a Palestinian state—and approve of broad Arab cooperation with Israel once such a peace agreement is established. Surprisingly, the most recent [Zogby poll](http://www.aaiusa.org/sir_bani_yas_poll_public_opin) (http://www.aaiusa.org/sir_bani_yas_poll_public_opin), whose presentations are often pro-Palestinian, confirms this finding; it shows the majority of Saudis supporting an actual “alliance” with Israel against Iran and terrorism after a Palestinian-Israeli accord. In the meantime, however, my [latest poll](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/unique-saudi-poll-shows-moderate-majority-but-sectarian-split) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/unique-saudi-poll-shows-moderate-majority-but-sectarian-split>) indicates that only around 20 percent of Saudis support open relations with Israel before the Palestinian issue is resolved.

Privately, Saudi media executives and other public intellectuals told me that concretely changing entrenched anti-Israel attitudes will take some time because considerable popular sympathy for the Palestinians persists. This is probably also true among many in the traditional religious establishment. One Saudi media personality relayed a rumor that not long ago, a large delegation of senior sheikhs spent four hours with King Salman, imploring him to at the very least slow down the pace of change. Ironically, he added, some who once saw the Saudi monarch as a mere gravely ill figurehead suddenly see him as a powerful check on the reformist impulses of his upstart offspring.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD JEWS

But it is not only Saudi views on Israel that have changed, at least for some younger urban professionals. Though I do not know of any solid polling evidence on the subject from recent years, it is my impression that the many hundreds of thousands of Saudis who have sought post-secondary education abroad have encountered and developed cordial relationships with local Jews as a result.

For example, one young Saudi I met, currently a television bureau director, told me that because his father’s best friend and classmate during a graduate degree program at Michigan State University was Jewish, both Saudi men still have a positive view of Jews today.

Another young Saudi professional now working at a prestigious private research institute in Riyadh volunteered this personal story: when he began pursuing a master’s degree in Middle East studies at the University of Utah, a more

senior colleague in the program recommended that he rent an apartment in one of the two neighborhoods nearby “where a lot of Jews live.” Those neighborhoods, this colleague explained, were the likeliest to be “safe, clean, have good schools, and offer you welcoming neighbors.” And sure enough, my new Saudi acquaintance listened to this advice, and came back to Saudi Arabia with a favorable outlook on Jews.

While it is true that these are only two anecdotes, if even a fraction of the 120,000 Saudis currently attending universities in the United States have similar experiences, this could have a far-reaching effect on national perceptions of Jews. To be sure, there are also anecdotes about individual Saudi students who became more alienated, prejudiced, and even radicalized during their education in Western countries—and I am personally less likely to run into them. Yet it seems that today these traditionally insular or aggressively self-righteous segments of Saudi society are at least balanced by newly open and more tolerant ones.

That judgment is buttressed by a look at Saudi mainstream media, where vintage anti-Semitic tropes are now largely conspicuous in their absence—though social media, sadly, tells a much more mixed story. Instead, nowadays one can even read the occasional sympathetic article about some Jewish matter in the Saudi press, usually on a historical rather than contemporary issue.

Similarly, the head of the Jeddah-based Muslim World League, H.E. Mohammad Al-Issa, has just in the past year become very vocal in both Arabic and English on this issue—not just denouncing the Holocaust and present-day Holocaust deniers, but also promoting a vision of Islam as tolerant toward other religions, including Judaism. One expert on the league notes the stark contrast between this message and all previous ones from the Saudi-led organization. This new message has impact; several of the Saudis I talked to in Riyadh recently said they were aware and appreciative of this different, more open, and enlightened Islamic institutional discourse, and they hoped it would continue to gather strength.

Here too, polling data provides some tangible evidence of an attitudinal shift. In the polls I supervised in mid-2015 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-saudi-poll-shows-iran-russia-united-states-and-isis-are-all-unpopular-m>) and mid-2017 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/unique-saudi-poll-shows-moderate-majority-but-sectarian-split>), Saudis were asked if they supported or opposed this statement: “We should listen to those among us who propose interpreting Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern way.” Over those two years, the proportion supporting such change actually doubled—but just from 15 percent to 30 percent. The next poll, slated for this October, will provide more information on whether this emerging trend is here to stay.

CONCLUSION: HOW MUCH CHANGE, TO WHAT EFFECT?

From the limited evidence available, it appears that these shifts in Saudi views of both Israel and Jews are very real, even if not universal. They may well have long-term effects on Saudi policy, yet there is no sign that they will yield any dramatic shifts in public opinion anytime soon. And their ultimate impact will depend on how they interact with a multitude of other factors affecting the kingdom’s stability, capabilities, and intentions: from personal preferences to palace politics to economic, security, international, and especially inter-Arab diplomatic developments.

Nevertheless, the attitudinal changes already underway, not just at the top but also in the middle of Saudi society, give some grounds for expecting Saudi Arabia to keep playing an active (albeit mostly behind-the-scenes) moderating role in both Arab-Israeli and interfaith affairs. More specifically, U.S. Middle East mediator Jason Greenblatt, in an under-reported interview last week, opined that he did not expect wide Arab “approval” when the Trump administration’s Arab-Israeli peace plan is eventually released—but he does see reasonable prospects for Arab acceptance and even “support.” The surrounding Arab states, he said, will certainly have a positive part to play in this scenario, although still a secondary one.

Given the background sketched above, something like Greenblatt’s vision seems at least a possible medium-term outcome. Views of Jews and Israel are just one of the many issues in play in Saudi Arabia today. The changes in this one domain are important, but still far from absolute.

Hassan Mneimneh (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/hassan-mneimneh>) Responds:

September 14, 2018

David Pollock presents systemic and anecdotal observations from his visit to Saudi Arabia pertaining to changes in attitudes toward Israel and Jews. These observations are supported by what can be observed in social media, both 1.0 (forums, still appreciated for the relative anonymity they provide) and 2.0 (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

To understand the shift towards Israel and Jews, it may be useful to place it in the context of the wider transformation of political and cultural discourse in Saudi Arabia, ushered in by the rise to power of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS). In social media, some softening can be noted towards Israel, albeit occasional and sporadic. On the other hand, a distinct hardening has emerged towards other Arabs, principally but not solely via the Qatar issue. Of particular note is a special assault on Palestinians in some “liberal” circles, with a recurrent and increasingly vocal narrative surfacing up from the cultural underground: that the Palestinians sold their land for petty cash (crudely rendered in the mocking “Filis-tini” — highlighting “Filis”, the Saudi equivalent of “pennies”), that Saudi Arabia has been their main benefactor, and that they have invariably been ingrates.

While often phrased in patriotic terms, considerable chauvinism permeates the new “Great Saudi Arabia” discourse (*al-Sa’udiyyah al-‘Uzma*) with MbS at its helm. Frequent open assault can be noted on other Arabs, together with a lamenting of the funds accorded to them, and calls for self-sufficiency through their expulsion from the Kingdom. Often, in the course of attacks on Palestinians and others, positive allusions towards Israel are included, at times with over-stated expressions of support for its policies, even while being portrayed as harsh.

This is no indication of a meaningful shift in position in absolute terms, but in relative measure, Israel may have inched up considerably as a result of the regression in the portrayal, characterization of, and position towards the Kingdom's perceived enemies. ❖

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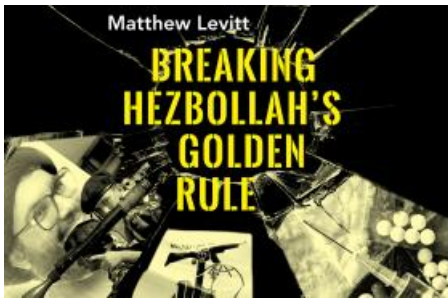
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