

Who Holds the Key to Peace with Israel?

by [Abdulhameed Hakeem \(/experts/abdulhameed-hakeem\)](/experts/abdulhameed-hakeem)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abdulhameed Hakeem \(/experts/abdulhameed-hakeem\)](/experts/abdulhameed-hakeem)

Abdulhameed Hakeem is General Manager of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.



Brief Analysis

Why were the doors of peace with Israel closed? Why were they surrounded by walls casting accusations of treason and unbelief at all those who draw near, even though all the divinely-revealed scriptures – the Torah, the New Testament, and the Quran – confirm that the Jews are an authentic part and partner in the history of the region? They are not the interlopers that the popular conception now ingrained in Arab culture portrays them as.

In order to begin to formulate an answer to these questions, we have to go back to the events of the July 1952 Revolution, when the Egyptian Army seized power in Egypt in cooperation with political Islam (in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood) and replaced the fledgling democracy with a military dictatorship.

Nasser was aware of the necessity of having an enemy to ensure his continued popularity, justify his dictatorship, and legitimize his expansionist ambitions in the region to become the undisputed leader of the Arab nation. The solution he found was to exploit the Arab-Israeli struggle. Using all methods available to him, he worked to entrench hostility towards the state of Israel and to ingrain a culture of hatred toward the Jews and denial of their historical rights in the region, until this hostility became a permanent part of the culture of Arab countries.

Most Arab regimes have pursued Abdel Nasser's approach of politically exploiting the Arab-Israeli conflict, using it as a sword of Damocles to intimidate national voices opposed to their political autocracy and confront their political adversaries in the region in the name of victory on the Palestinian issue.

For this reason, the late President Anwar Sadat paid with his life when he made peace with Israel by signing the Camp David Accords and then the bilateral peace treaty in 1979. Not only did this agreement clash with the interests of Arab regimes invested in exploiting the Arab-Israeli conflict for their own purposes, but it also clashed with the aspirations of political Islam -- which had been increasing its penetration of the region's societies ever since Arab nationalism fell into discredit with the defeat of its main proponent –l Nasser – in the 1967 war.

Arab regimes, which have been exploiting the Arab – Israeli conflict managed in coordination with political Islam to eliminate Sadat whose assassination was a warning message against approaching the threshold of peace, and it increased the culture of hatred of Jews and denial of their historical rights in the region. This culture has acquired a religious cover, accusing of unbelief and treason everyone who dares to even discuss whether these attitudes are correct or not. This is due to the way that the ideology of political Islam has permeated Arab societies. In a context where the tyranny of political systems blocked political participation and thus produced political illiteracy, political

Islam offered a plausible alternative.

Saudi Arabia attempted peace through the Arab Peace Initiative endorsed at the Arab Summit in Beirut in 2002, the boldest step since the birth of the Arab-Israeli conflict; but it stalled for the same reasons that led to the failure of Oslo and the killing of Sadat.

The rules of the game began to change in the region in 2003 after the fall of the Iraqi regime, which signaled that new players would enter the region because of the apparent political vacuum in the Arab world. The 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel and the launch of the Turkish “Freedom Flotilla” to Gaza in 2010 signaled the true shift in the rules of the game with the entrance of Turkey and Iran into the conflict.

The year 2011 saw new events and changes – the Arab Spring – in the region, resulting in the downfall of some Arab regimes. Political Islam was the heir to these regimes as a natural result of the absence of political participation and weak political consciousness in these societies. Both Sunni and Shia political Islam presided over the scene, imposing the dominance of Turkey or Iran on key Arab players in the region. It should be noted here that Iranian and Turkish domination created a bloody chaos that transformed the societies of the region into areas of civil war driven by sectarian conflict or power struggle. To hide their undeniable fingerprints on the destruction of the region, Iran and Turkey have used political Islam to place the responsibility for this chaos onto Israel, exploiting the hatred of these societies for the Jews, thus facilitating the passing off of flimsy evidence wrapped in the name of religion. They drop Quranic verses that were handed down in temporal circumstances specific to the Jews of almost 1400 years ago onto the reality of Jews today to market hatred of the Jews and to persuade Arab societies that they and their representative arm in political Islam are innocent of responsibility for the destruction of the region. Instead, they shift responsibility to Israel.

Despite the unfortunate reality in the region, the justice of fate is opening a window of hope to exit this dark tunnel, embodied in the preeminence on the Saudi political scene of a young prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, pursuing new policies completely different from the traditional pattern. Yet the question poses itself: What is the nature of this historic opportunity to achieve peace with Israel, which would allow the region to escape the dark tunnel of endless conflict? Why Prince Mohammed Bin Salman? And why now?

The historic window of hope and opportunity is that Saudi Arabia is the religious focus of Muslims and enjoys an exalted status among the societies of the region in particular, and in the Islamic world in general. Saudi Arabia can, therefore, legitimize peace with Israel both on the popular and political levels.

Observers of the Saudi political scene perceive that both domestically and in foreign policy, there is a new approach in Saudi politics unlike the traditional route was taken by previous Saudi leadership. The proponent of this new approach is Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, who is the missing link between Saudi Arabia’s ability to perform this role in achieving peace and the political will needed to decide for peace. He has the ability and the courage to break the traditional constraints or to cross red lines in Saudi politics, so to speak, such as of the religious police, allowing music concerts, and equality of women, including allowing them the right to drive. He has adopted resolutions that have caused radical changes in the nature, culture, and management of society: from an extremist religious administration to a civil, civilized administration appropriate to the new culture of the society.

Whoever has the courage to make these bold decisions and to face down a culture of resistance from the old guard will surely be able to make a decision for peace with Israel, one that derives its legitimacy from moderate Islam and from the holiest religious sites in the region and in the Islamic world. The young prince’s political will to achieve peace will save what remains of the societies of the region from falling into the abyss and will end a conflict that has lasted more than seventy years and only brings about more losses, vulnerability, and terrorism.

The repercussions of the Arab Spring, which resulted in bloody chaos that made the peoples of the region aware of

the false slogans that they had espoused for decades, have created a historic opportunity to create a culture of peace with Israel. It has become possible to accept the idea of a peace that augurs well for the future of a new Middle East that allows these peoples' dreams for growth, prosperity, and security to be realized – in sharp contrast with the current miserable reality.

Finally, the world community, including the major powers that have strategic interests in the region and especially the United States, must support the peace process between moderate countries – led by Saudi Arabia – and Israel. The world community must support the new political approaches adopted by the Crown Prince. He is a man of peace and of the current moment in the region, and he holds the key to a popular and political peace with Israel that has remained elusive for more than seventy years. ❖

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