

Mohammed bin Salman Doesn't Want to Talk About Jerusalem

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Saudi Arabia's rulers have lots of worries, but Trump's announcement about the holy city isn't one of them.

Saudi Arabia, the protector of Islam and home to its two holiest sites, is a good place to judge the impact of President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital on U.S. interests in the region. Set aside the reaction of terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, and their state sponsors in Tehran and Damascus. And the angry responses from the Palestinian Authority and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, with its large and boisterous Palestinian population, were certainly to be expected. The real question is how America's friends one step removed from the circle of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would react. If there were a place one might reasonably expect to hear Muslims expressing thunderous outrage at the handing of Jerusalem to the Jews, it would be in the corridors of power in the Saudi capital of Riyadh.

It didn't happen.

Last week, I was in Riyadh leading a delegation of more than 50 supporters and fellows of the Middle East think tank I direct. On Wednesday, just hours before the president made his Jerusalem announcement, we spent five hours in meetings with three different Saudi ministers, discussing everything from crises with Yemen, Qatar, and Lebanon, to the kingdom's ambitious "Vision 2030" reform program, to the possible public offering of the state oil company Aramco.

By this time, the White House had delivered numerous background briefings to foreign diplomats and the media, so the essence of the impending declaration was well known. But despite many opportunities, the word "Jerusalem" was never uttered.

Perhaps the Saudis are waiting to unload in our final meeting on the day, I thought, during a conversation with the

secretary-general of the Muslim World League (MWL). For decades, this organization has been notorious (<http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Foreign-Funded-Islamist-Extremism-final.pdf>) for propagating an extreme version of Islam—funding schools, mosques, and other religious institutions that have served as incubators for Sunni jihadis (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/saudi-arabia-terrorism-funding-214241>). Surely, the head of the MWL would denounce America’s assault on the sanctity of Muslim control of Jerusalem.

To my amazement, the relatively new MWL head, Muhammad al-Issa, had a very different message. Mention of Jerusalem never passed his lips. Instead, he noted with pride the friendships he has built with rabbis in Europe and America, the visit he recently made to a synagogue in Paris, and the interfaith dialogue to which he said he was now committed. This was not your father’s Saudi Arabia.

Then, it dawned on me: Maybe the Saudis are waiting to hear precisely what President Trump says in his statement, hoping that last-minute entreaties would convince him to change course. Since the president didn’t speak until 9 p.m. Riyadh time, I went to bed that night confident we would soon see the fire and brimstone of the “old” Saudi Arabia. When we received confirmation the following morning that we would have an audience with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—deputy prime minister, minister of defense, president of the council of economic and development affairs, and favorite son of the king—we knew we would get an authoritative answer.

Mohammed bin Salman has promised fast, revolutionary change in a country where, historically, nothing moves fast and “revolutionary” is a dirty word. And he has already shown he is a doer, not just a talker, by successfully concentrating virtually all the kingdom’s political, military, and economic power in his own hands. This is where the buck stops in Saudi Arabia these days.

A word about meeting Mohammed bin Salman: In a country not known for retail politics, he has the natural skills of a born politician. Though dressed in a thawb and sandals, he was very Bill Clintonesque (from the pre-vegan era, that is) in his stature and charisma. He is a large man, yet he bounded into our tight meeting room and immediately pounded the flesh. And when I ended the meeting after 80 minutes so we wouldn’t miss our departing flight, he stuck around to work the room again, shaking hands until there were no hands left to shake.

It is easy to see why all the young people we met in Riyadh—college students, aspiring entrepreneurs, rising technocrats—are smitten with Mohammed bin Salman. I have met quite a few Middle East leaders over the years and only a few, like Jordan’s King Hussein, knew when and how to deploy charm, wit, wisdom, outrage, despair, and hope like a virtuoso. Mohammed bin Salman has that too, coupled with a dynamism that I have rarely ever seen in this part of the world.

Though he clearly speaks and understands English, he chose to address us in Arabic, and after a few sentences, I understood why. When he opened his mouth, words flowed out in a torrent, like water rushing over rapids. Mohammed bin Salman has a lot to say—about jettisoning entrenched but non-Islamic ideas about separating women and men, about containing Iran now or fighting them later, and about a hundred other topics—and doesn’t seem to have a lot of time to say it. Given how many people he has sidelined along his rise to the top, it may be a well-founded fear.

It is not apparent that Jerusalem was one of those topics. If we hadn’t asked him directly about Trump’s announcement, it may never have come up. He certainly didn’t come to the meeting to vent.

But we wanted to leave Riyadh with a clear sense of his view on the issue, so we asked him. To maintain a measure of confidentiality, I won’t quote him directly, but I can say this: He limited himself to a single word of disappointment about the President’s decision—literally—and then quickly turned to where Riyadh and Washington could work together to limit the fallout and restore hope to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

He didn't stop there. On a day widely characterized as one of the darkest for U.S. relations with the Arab world in decades, Mohammed bin Salman offered a very different vision for both the Saudi-American relationship and a potential for Saudi-Israeli partnership.

On the former, he repeatedly affirmed the strength of the security partnership, which he proudly noted was the oldest in the region—even older than the one between the United States and Israel. And on Israel itself, he struck an unusually positive note. Unlike what I heard from Saudi leaders on past visits, he said nothing about Israeli expansionism, Israeli arrogance, Israeli unfairness, or Israeli encroachment on Muslim rights in Jerusalem. Instead, he spoke of the promising future that awaited Saudi-Israeli relations once peace was reached and, operationally, he committed himself to bringing that about.

That was it: the official Saudi view. Expecting a stern critique of the United States and a visceral denunciation of Trump, we heard instead a mild rebuke of the President's Jerusalem shift and a hopeful vision of Saudi-Israeli partnership. We didn't have the opportunity to press Mohammed bin Salman on precisely what the Saudis would do to urge the Palestinian Authority to reach a deal with the Israelis, but at such a moment, hearing the Saudi crown prince double down on both the current partnership with Washington and, when peace comes, the future one with Jerusalem was more than we expected.

Was Mohammed bin Salman merely delivering what his audience wanted to hear? Perhaps. Our delegation was certainly electrified by his engaging personality and what he had to say. We were especially impressed by his pursuit of a "moderate Islam" and his claim to have dramatically shrunk the number of extremists in Saudi religious institutions. He offered specific percentages of how bad the problem was two years ago and how much smaller he expects it to be three years from now; to my ears, this amounted to a stark admission of Saudi responsibility for religious fanaticism and a powerful sign of their commitment to change.

Admittedly, some of his rhetoric sounded too good to be true. From my vantage point, it doesn't appear that the Saudis have made as much progress countering Iran's influence in Iraq or turning the tide in Yemen as they claim. And many of us came away fearful that a leader so ambitious could achieve progress fast enough to maintain the ongoing support of his people—but not so fast as to trigger a violent reaction from those who will lose out as a result of the vast transformation.

But if Mohammed bin Salman did say what we wanted to hear, so what? The opposite could just have easily been the case—namely, that he could have used the occasion to send a piercing message through us to American leaders and to friends of the U.S.-Israel relationship about the high costs of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. He didn't, and that matters a great deal.

Those who prophesied that the Arab and Muslim response to recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital would be apocalyptic—waves of anti-American demonstrations, mass violence against U.S. citizens, institutions and interests, and the final and irrevocable end of American influence in the region—seem to have been totally wrong. Among the Arabs that count—America's allies—the reaction has generally been sober, measured, and mature. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is the case in point.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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