

# Assessing Crown Prince Abdullah's 'Normalization' Plan

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

**O**n February 17, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia was quoted by New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman as saying that he had drafted a speech ready for delivery before next month's Arab summit, offering the "idea" of "full normalization of relations" with Israel in exchange for "full withdrawal from all the occupied territory, in accordance with U.N. resolutions, including in Jerusalem." As Friedman's column was headlined, this was an "intriguing signal" from the Saudi heir. Is it an important one, too?

## Background

These comments by Abdullah, who is seventy-nine this year, do not mark the first time that Saudi leaders have broken what seems to be new ground in inter-Arab discussions about formulating diplomatic positions vis-a-vis Israel. Nor is this the first time that Saudi leaders have used media interviews to float diplomatic trial balloons. On August 7, 1981, the previous Saudi crown prince (and current king) Fahd bin Abdul Aziz gave an interview to the Saudi Press Agency in which he lambasted the "failure" and "uselessness" of the Egypt-Israel Camp David Accords and then offered an alternative initiative based on the inclusion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the peace process. He then presented eight "principles which may be taken as guidelines" for a future peace deal. These included full withdrawal to the 1967 borders (including Jerusalem), dismantling of all Israeli settlements, and affirmation of the Palestinian "right to return or compensation." What caused a stir was number seven: "that all states in the region should be able to live in peace."

Even though he did not mention Israel, Fahd's comments sent shockwaves through the region because they implied Saudi support for the principle embedded in UN Security Council Resolution 242, i.e., that "every State in the area" had the "right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." Fury from regional radicals, especially Syria and Iraq, was unrelenting; even the PLO executive committee rejected it. The result was that Fahd's plan of August 1981 was watered down when eventually endorsed as the Fez Plan by the Arab summit that met in September 1982. In that communique, the new "principle number seven" stated that "the UN Security Council" -- i.e., not necessarily those states endorsing the communique itself -- "will guarantee peace for all the states of the region." Saudi Arabia had acceded to wording that regional radicals could swallow.

An additional wrinkle that provides useful context to Abdullah's recent statement is that he played a key role in the 1981-82 initiative, too. After Fahd's initial interview, speculation centered on whether his statement did or did not

promise Saudi recognition of Israel per se. (A Saudi UN delegate said "yes" and was repudiated by a "senior Saudi source" within twenty-four hours, for example.) The matter was finally settled by none other than Abdullah, then (as now) deputy prime minister and commander of the Saudi National Guard. In a fascinating Time magazine interview (November 9, 1981), he stated without ambiguity that article seven of the Fahd proposals signified eventual recognition of Israel. In other words, according to Abdullah himself, bilateral diplomatic recognition was already offered to Israel in 1981.

### Interpreting the Friedman Interview

In his New York Times interview, the "demand side" of Abdullah's offer remained unchanged from the original Fahd plan -- i.e., full withdrawal to the 1967 borders. This demand goes beyond what Palestinian negotiators demanded (and even accepted) in the Camp David-Taba talks. For example, it suggests a return to the status quo ante in Jerusalem (i.e., a divided city) rather than the formula of "Jewish neighborhoods to Israel; Arab neighborhoods to Palestine" that guided the Israeli-Palestinian talks. It also does not envision "settlement blocs" whose delineation was agreed to in principle between the negotiators. By implication, the demand for the 1967 borders also means that the Arab side will no longer press the demand for territorial linkage between the West Bank and Gaza, which has been a principal Palestinian priority throughout the Oslo process.

Interestingly, Abdullah was silent on two key points: the Palestinian right of return and acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state. The former is a longstanding Arab demand, repeated most recently in Yasir Arafat's own New York Times op-ed on February 3. The latter is a critical point which emerged from the July 2000 Camp David talks, when Palestinian negotiators questioned not only Jewish claims but even the Jewish connection to Jerusalem; it was given U.S. diplomatic weight when Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to the need for recognition of "Israel as a Jewish state" in his November 19 Louisville speech.

None of this has made much news. What has garnered headlines is Abdullah's reference to "full normalization of relations." These are code words. "Full normalization" is a term that generally refers to the most robust form of bilateral ties -- political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, transport, touristic, etc. "Normal, peaceful relations" is an Egypt-Israel construction, adopted by the late Hafiz al-Asad in Syria-Israel peace talks, that suggests a much more restrictive "cold peace" type of relationship. If the speech in Abdullah's drawer -- the one yet to be delivered -- uses the term "full normalization" (in Arabic, *tatbiya*), then it does mark a welcome innovation from previous Saudi statements.

Yet, is it important? Though intriguing and significant, a Saudi statement promising "full normalization" in exchange for the demands laid out by Abdullah is almost surely not relevant in today's geopolitical context. Regrettably, it is at least nineteen months too late -- and probably six to seven years past the time when it could have made a difference in the peace diplomacy. Indeed, to paraphrase the Saudi foreign minister, that Saudi Arabia would offer "full normalization" today after passing up golden opportunities when it might have made a difference in negotiations "could drive a sane man mad."

There was a time -- i.e., throughout the Rabin-Peres government (1992-96) -- when Israel advanced a concept of peacemaking based on the idea of peace with the inner circle of regional states, founded on territorial compromise with the Palestinians, so as to build a protective wall against the aggressive intentions of the outer wall of regional states, i.e., Iraq and Iran. According to this argument, which sometimes morphed into the "new Middle East" concept, the basic tradeoff for Israel was territory to the Palestinians in exchange for recognition and acceptance by nonradical Arab states. Participation of numerous Arab states alongside Israel in the multilateral peace process and the Casablanca process of regional economic summits were signs of the promised regional integration that would eventually accompany full peace.

While there were some modest Saudi steps in support of that paradigm -- most notably the suspension of the secondary boycott against Israel -- Riyadh was always viewed as a reluctant player in this process. While other Arab states such as Morocco, Qatar, Tunisia, and even Oman embraced all or part of the regional dynamic, Saudi Arabia remained aloof, never hosting a multilateral working group meeting or a visiting Israeli delegation (in public, that is). A Saudi pronouncement on "full normalization" during that period would have truly changed the regional landscape; it may have been the key missing link that both kept the multilateral process from gelling and fed Israeli skepticism about the entire enterprise.

A second lost opportunity was at Camp David in July 2000. During the summit, when Arafat was apparently looking for signs from regional heavyweights about the wisdom of compromise -- and when Israel itself was contemplating the extent of compromise it was willing to offer -- Saudi Arabia (and others) counseled caution, not boldness. A Saudi declaration on "full normalization" at that time might have been a major inducement to the negotiators, one that could have led the talks (or subsequent negotiations) to a different outcome.

Today, the dynamic has changed fundamentally. After seventeen months of intifada-cum-guerilla war, it is difficult to imagine Israelis contemplating any incremental territorial concessions to Palestinians because of the attraction of "normalization" with Saudi Arabia. And by restating impossible-to-fill demands that themselves have been overtaken by previous Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the apparent Saudi offer also fails to reflect the political reality on the ground for both Israelis and Palestinians. (It is noteworthy that Abdullah apparently did not tell Friedman that he would accept whatever agreement the Palestinian leadership worked out with Israel. In this regard, the 2002 Saudi plan echoes its 1981 predecessor in an important way: just as the first was designed to provide an alternative to the Sadat-driven bilateral diplomacy that produced Camp David, perhaps this gambit is designed to once again regionalize diplomacy from concessions that Palestinians contemplated but did not fully accept at Camp David and Taba.)

### Conclusion

Any time a Saudi talks of normalizing with Israel to any extent, it is good news. Crown Prince Abdullah's statements are welcome and, in the Saudi worldview, even groundbreaking. He should be urged to deliver the actual speech, which is sure to spark further inter-Arab debate over whether and how to make peace with Israel. In the real world of politics and diplomacy, however, Abdullah's comments amount to a quaint irrelevancy -- too little, too late. Far more than making the compensation package for Israel's full withdrawal more attractive, an Arab offer of compromise on the key issues under negotiation -- land, refugees, Jerusalem -- would make a real difference in the Arab-Israeli equation.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

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