

SAUDI CROWN PRINCE “MBS” DISCUSSES MODERNIZATION,
REFORM, & ISRAEL DURING U.S. TRIP
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Isranet Daily Briefing, April 10, 2018
<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-discusses-modernization-reform-israel-during-u-s-trip/>

[Our Fair Weathered Saudi Friend: Caroline Glick, *Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 8, 2018](#)— Have we entered a new period of sweetness and light with our Arab neighbors?

[Saudi Arabia Can Win Islam’s War of Ideas: John Hannah, *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 15, 2018](#)— When U.S. President Donald Trump welcomes Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House later this month, there will be no shortage of urgent issues to discuss

[The Saudi Arabia-Middle East Studies Love Affair Is Over: A.J. Caschetta, *New English Review*, March 19, 2018](#)— There’s a new political order taking shape in the Middle East, and it’s shaking up the academic order that has dominated Middle East studies for over three decades.

[The Qatar Opposition: Avoiding the Hariri Miscalculation: Irina Tsukerman, *BESA*, Mar. 12, 2018](#)— Lebanese PM Saad Hariri’s tendered his resignation while he was in Riyadh, purportedly under pressure from the Saudi government.

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[Saudi Crown Prince Recognizes Israel’s Right to Exist, Talks up Future Ties: *Times of Israel*, Apr. 2, 2018](#)

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OUR FAIR WEATHERED SAUDI FRIEND

Caroline Glick

[Jerusalem Post](#), Apr. 8, 2018

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Have we entered a new period of sweetness and light with our Arab neighbors? On Monday *The Atlantic* published an interview the magazine’s editor Jeffrey Goldberg conducted with Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Hours after its publication, the responses began pouring in.

The basic line, repeated by all major newspapers, is that the Saudi crown prince recognized Israel’s right to exist. Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt gushed about it on his Twitter feed. Referring to the interview as “amazing,” Greenblatt wrote that “all should watch [Muhammad bin Salman]. He is far from perfect [and] there is a long road ahead, but in a region long dominated by hateful despots, [the prince] envisions a very different future for Muslims, Jews, Christians and all in the Middle East.” Other commentators were even more exhilarated.

Are the prince’s fans correct? Is his ascendance to the Saudi crown the harbinger of a reformation of Islam and the beginning of a new era in Islamic relations with the Jews and the world as a whole? Not really. Most of the reports on the interview have focused on the prince’s remarks in which he ostensibly recognized Israel’s right to exist. But did he actually recognize Israel’s right to exist? Did he distinguish himself from all the other Arab leaders who to date have recognized that Israel exists but not admitted it has a right to exist? Let’s check the text.

Goldberg asked the prince, “Do you believe the Jewish people have a right to a nation-state in at least part of their ancestral homeland?” Muhammad replied, “I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land. But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for everyone and to have normal relations.” Does this mean that he recognized Israel’s right to exist in the Land of Israel? Maybe. Maybe not.

Where is the Israelis’ “own land”? In Jerusalem? In New York? Goldberg tried to find out. He asked, “You have no religious-based objection to the existence of Israel?” Muhammad responded, “We have religious concerns about the fate of the holy mosque in Jerusalem and about the rights of the Palestinian people. This is what we have. We don’t have any objection against any other people.” In other words, it certainly appears that the prince has a religious-based objection to the existence of Israel. Sort of.

As Dr. Harold Rhode, a recently retired adviser on Islamic Affairs in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense explains, during much of his conversation with

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Goldberg, Muhammad engaged in the Islamic practice of “*taqiyya*,” or dissimulation for the benefit of Islam. According to the Koran, Muslims are permitted to lie about Islam to advance the faith. This conclusion is easily reached when considering his responses to other questions, which like his answer regarding Israel, were deliberately imprecise. Goldberg asked Muhammad simple direct questions and he responded with answers that were either misleading or open to multiple interpretations.

Consider their discussion of Wahhabism. Since Saudi Arabia was established 85 years ago, it has been governed under Wahhabist Islam. Wahhabism, a school of Islam founded in the 18th century by the radical Islamic scholar Ibn Abdel el-Wahhab, views itself as the only legitimate version of Islam. Wahhabism calls for the abrogation of all novel interpretations of Islam. It aspires to Islamic global dominion. And upholds jihad. Since at least 1979, the Saudis have invested billions of petrodollars in spreading Wahhabist Islam throughout the world. But when Goldberg asked Muhammad about those petrodollars, the crown prince acted like he didn't know what Goldberg was talking about. “This Wahhabism, please define it for us. We're not familiar with it. We don't know about it,” Muhammad said innocently.

Goldberg responded with amazement, “What do you mean you don't know about it?” Unmoved, he responded, “What is Wahhabism?” Goldberg replied, “You're the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. You know what Wahhabism is.” Muhammad countered, “No one can define this Wahhabism.” He then proceeded to deny any connection with the creed of Saudi Arabia while boldly and entirely dishonestly presenting the kingdom as a paragon of religious tolerance where all forms of Islam, including Shi'ite Islam, are treated equally.

Another statement from Muhammad that generated significant interest was his claim that there is no Islamic religious duty to propagate Islam in the non-Islamic world today. In his words, “Today in non-Muslim countries, every human being has the right to choose his or her belief. Religious books can be bought in every country. The message is delivered. Now it is no longer a duty for us to fight for the propagation of Islam.”

While Muhammad's statement is refreshingly straightforward, its meaning is less so. He made his statement as a way of arguing that the calls for jihad and the establishment of a caliphate by the Muslim Brotherhood are un-Islamic. Certainly, it would be significant if the Saudis stopped funding the radical mosques they

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founded worldwide. It would be even more significant if he said that his regime is ordering the mosques the Saudis established throughout the world to preach peaceful coexistence with the non-Islamic world and to reject jihad. But he said nothing of the sort. Moreover, it is hard to take his claims seriously since he then went on to deny any familiarity with Wahhabism, the creed that has ruled his kingdom for four generations...

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SAUDI ARABIA CAN WIN ISLAM’S WAR OF IDEAS

John Hannah

[Foreign Policy](#), Mar. 15, 2018

...Nearly two decades after 9/11, America’s greatest failure in the war on terrorism has almost certainly been its inability to delegitimize the extremist ideas fueling groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The United States has killed tens of thousands of fighters, disrupted revenue streams, and shuttered social media accounts. What it hasn’t done effectively is discredit the hate-filled doctrine that continues to draw a steady stream of recruits to the terrorist cause — leaving it to confront this unsettling reality: By an order of magnitude, al Qaeda in 2018 enjoys a larger presence in more countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia than it did the day the Twin Towers were felled.

It hasn’t been for lack of trying. Both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama understood that we wouldn’t be able to just kill our way out of the conflict with radical Islamists. Each devoted considerable resources to what’s been called the “battle for hearts and minds.” Whether through programs to promote democracy or counter violent extremism, both administrations made ample efforts to dissuade Muslims around the world from the path of murderous jihad — but to little avail.

What’s consistently been missing from America’s strategy have been powerful

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partners in the Muslim world who can reliably be counted on to speak out authoritatively on matters of Islamic theology in ways that the United States simply can't. That's where Saudi Arabia comes in. It's the birthplace of Islam and host to the faith's two holiest mosques. Combined with abundant oil wealth, these assets bestow on the Saudis a measure of soft power influence unrivaled in the Muslim world.

Unfortunately, for decades that power was wielded largely for ill. In an effort to counter the threat of Iran's 1979 Shiite revolution, and burnish their legitimacy at home with powerful religious conservatives, Saudi rulers plowed billions of dollars annually into spreading the kingdom's extremely harsh version of Islam — aka Wahhabism — around the world. Saudi funds built mosques and schools on every continent. They trained radical clerics and teachers to staff them. They distributed editions of the Koran and school textbooks heavily skewed toward messages of hatred against anyone — including other Muslims — who failed to toe the line of Wahhabi orthodoxy. In this way, millions of young believers from Mali to Malaysia, from Belgium to Bangladesh, have had their idea of what it means to be a good Muslim insidiously shaped by a narrative that systematically dehumanized the “other” — creating a large pool of potential recruits who inevitably had a heightened susceptibility to the siren song of jihadism.

Enter the enormous promise of Mohammed bin Salman. For months, the crown prince and his closest advisors have relentlessly hammered the theme that Saudi Arabia's modernization requires an embrace of “moderate Islam.” He's slammed the extremist ideology that the kingdom did so much to empower after the Iranian revolution and acknowledges that “the problem spread all over the world.” He's vowed that “now is the time to get rid of it” and declared that “we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately.”

It's not just talk, either. At home, the powers of the kingdom's notorious religious police have been scaled back. Prominent hard-line clerics have been jailed. On the all-important issue of female empowerment, the pace of change has been breathtaking. Women can now open businesses without the approval of a male guardian. They're being allowed to enter the military for the first time and attend sporting and cultural events. This summer, the ban on women driving will disappear.

Now, the U.S. imperative should be pressing Mohammed bin Salman to take his

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campaign for moderate Islam on the road. His willingness to “destroy” the monster of global jihadism that the kingdom helped create needs to be turned into a concrete action plan. To their credit, the Saudis have already invested heavily in a center focused on countering extremism in cyberspace. Trump should press to make the ideological battle an institutionalized feature of the U.S.-Saudi dialogue. A bilateral working group should quietly be established to develop a strategy that can be jointly monitored. More than a decade ago, the U.S. Treasury did something similar to help the Saudis get on top of their terror finance problem, and by all accounts the collaboration has produced significant results.

There should be multiple elements to such an effort, but some immediate tasks come to mind. First, school textbooks. The Saudis promised to eliminate the hate-filled passages a decade ago. Progress has slowly been made, but the job’s still not done. Mohammed bin Salman should order it finished — this year. Behind the scenes, U.S. experts should provide verification. Second, working with trusted partners in indigenous communities known for their religious moderation, the Saudis should conduct a thorough audit of the global network of mosques, schools, and charitable organizations that they’ve backed with an eye toward weeding out radical staff and content. Third, initiate a worldwide buyback of Saudi-distributed mistranslations of the Quran and other religious materials notorious for propagating extremist narratives.

On the Saudi side, the effort could be well led by a Mohammed bin Salman ally, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, the new head of the powerful Muslim World League — an organization once at the forefront of exporting Wahhabism. Mohammed bin Issa has already taken extraordinary steps such as visiting a French synagogue and issuing an unprecedented letter condemning Holocaust denial. A masterstroke would be taking on an independent advisor in the mold of Farah Pandith, a Muslim-American woman of Indian descent who served for five years as the U.S. representative to Muslim communities. In that job, she traveled to 80 countries, witnessing firsthand Wahhabism’s destructive impact at a local level. While a fierce critic of the Saudi legacy, Pandith also understands the opportunity that Mohammed bin Salman presents and the imperative of converting it into concrete, positive change on the ground...

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THE SAUDI ARABIA-MIDDLE EAST STUDIES LOVE AFFAIR IS OVER

A.J. Caschetta

[New English Review](#), March 19, 2018

There’s a new political order taking shape in the Middle East, and it’s shaking up the academic order that has dominated Middle East studies for over three decades. With Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and what’s left of Assad’s Syria on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Israel on the other, academics are finding new enemies and new allies. Saudi Arabia, once an important ally and benefactor of Middle East specialists, suddenly finds itself subjected to the contempt usually reserved for Israel. Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince.

Under the old order, the field of Middle East studies benefitted enormously from what Israeli diplomat Dore Gold calls Saudi Arabia’s “massive campaign to bring Wahhabi Islam to the world.” In 1976, Saudi Arabia made its first donation to an American university: one million dollars to the University of Southern California. Since then, Saudi kings, princes, and oil tycoons have gone in search of cooperative institutions and scholars to lend the imprimatur of a respected university to their “activist philanthropy.” Universities were given millions of dollars, while individuals benefitted from the trickle-down effect with ample funding for conferences, academic publishing houses, and jobs. This greatly amplified professors’ bias against Israel while pandering to Saudi sensibilities, helping to normalize reactionary Islam.

Now, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), Saudi Arabia has undertaken an impressive series of reforms, and yet he has become academia’s newest target. But it’s not only the Saudis under attack; the left is turning on its own. For instance, last November when famed liberal columnist Thomas Friedman wrote in the New York Times that “The most significant reform process underway anywhere in the Middle East today is Saudi Arabia,” he found himself smeared a week later in an open letter to the Times by seven “Senior Middle East Scholars.” The scholars labeled Friedman the prince’s dupe and

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denounced his article as propaganda, suggesting in dictatorial fashion that he be “investigated and perhaps even suspended for writing it.”

In rhetoric that recalls the left’s treatment of Israeli leaders, MbS was described as “the mastermind of an illegal war that has devastated the lives of millions, and today borders on genocide.” The real Arab Spring, they insisted, “was an attempt by young people . . . to democratize their political systems,” and Friedman’s misapplication of the phrase shows that he “is divorced from reality.” Granted, any Saudi reform package deserves a healthy dose of skepticism, and the Vision 2030 program is no exception, but MbS has already made progress unimaginable a few years ago.

One would think these efforts would be encouraged, but instead MbS was scolded: “while a Saudi woman might soon be able to drive, bin Salman has shown no willingness to clamp down on Saudi funding of many of the most extreme religious forces in the Muslim world.” It’s gratifying to witness academics who are willing to acknowledge “extreme forces in the Muslim world,” much less “clamp down” on its funding, but where have they been? The repressive nature of previous Saudi royals has never been a secret, so why the frantic outburst over a prince who might actually diminish repression?

One component of the field’s new hostility is its support for Saudi Arabia’s nemesis, Iran. Many influential academics are convinced there are moderate forces within the Iranian regime that should be respected, and they continue to support the JCPOA, Obama’s ineffective nuclear deal.

Another factor is the chill in Saudi-Qatari relations. Many Middle East studies specialists, including three of the “senior scholars” who want Friedman fired, write for Al-Jazeera, an organ of the state-owned Qatar Media Corporation that welcomes an anti-Saudi outlook. Perhaps the luster of an Al-Jazeera article on one’s radical chic resume will be diminished with the recent bipartisan congressional call for an investigation into the network...*[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]*

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THE QATAR OPPOSITION: AVOIDING THE HARIRI MISCALCULATION

Irina Tsukerman

[BESA](#), Mar. 12, 2018

Lebanese PM Saad Hariri's tendered his resignation while he was in Riyadh, purportedly under pressure from the Saudi government. Shortly after his return to Lebanon, he then withdrew his resignation and awkwardly tried to claim that it had been done for dramatic effect. This non-resignation drew concern, if not outright mockery - not because it took place under duress, but because it failed so spectacularly. Now, Hariri, in an effort to mitigate the damage done to the public image of all the parties involved, is taking his first trip to the kingdom since these events.

The thrust of the original story is that Hariri was invited to Saudi Arabia and there was induced to resign. Some speculated that he was being held hostage until he agreed, though all parties denied these rumors. Regardless, the apparent purpose of the move was to send a signal to Hezbollah, the Islamist terrorist organization and Iranian proxy that now controls most of the Lebanese government and institutions. Many Christians residing in Lebanon have chosen to align themselves with Hezbollah, which likewise enjoys popular support among the Shiite citizens of the country. The power play failed for a straightforward reason: as Hezbollah largely controls the government, it doesn't much matter whether Hariri or someone else is in place. Anyone who is neither Hezbollah nor its ally is essentially a powerless puppet in Lebanon.

Why the Saudis ever thought that Hariri carried sufficient weight to shift the political direction in Lebanon is the real enigma here. The operation also plainly lacked finesse and drew the kind of international attention, speculation, conspiracy theories, and outrage that were almost certain to backfire on its originators. Although the Saudis and the UAE have assisted Lebanon with the issue of displaced Syrians, by 2016, the kingdom had cut billions of dollars in humanitarian aid to Lebanon, allowing Tehran to move in even further.

By November 2017, it had become clear that the Saudis view Hezbollah (and the remnants of the Lebanese government, which has been subsumed into the

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organization) as an aggressor state in cahoots with Iran, Qatar, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Nor are they wrong. The aggressive strategy of countering Iranian proxies and allies makes sense. However, the execution of this operation could have enjoyed greater success had the Saudis 1) not alienated much of their popular support through the punitive cuts in humanitarian aid; and 2) differentiated between Hezbollah and its facilitators and regular people who, in many cases, have ended up supporting the organization for lack of any better alternatives.

However, despite the harsh criticism levied at Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman over this episode, it was no more than a bump in the road, and the line of reasoning behind it was essentially correct. The Lebanese leadership opposed to Hezbollah cannot go along to get along; it enables the worst practices of the organization and thus betrays its constituents.

The Saudis should not be discouraged by the vocal reactions of the international community, but rather refine their approach in Lebanon and try to reengage with a combination of hard and soft power after taking some time to plan out the next steps. Those steps are not hard to define. Riyadh can surely recommit to providing assistance, but this time restructure its efforts to bypass the enemy-led government and corrupt institutions. It can focus instead on education and skills training, encourage entrepreneurship, and direct grassroots humanitarian relief, as well as diversify its proactive partnerships...

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[Saudi Crown Prince Recognizes Israel’s Right to Exist, Talks up Future Ties: *Times of Israel*, Apr. 2, 2018](#)—Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in an interview published Monday, recognized Israel’s right to exist and extolled the prospect of future diplomatic relations between his kingdom and the Jewish state.

[What a Crown Prince Wants: Jonathan Spyer, Breaking Israel News, Mar. 25,](#)

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2018—Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud is here to rebrand. If all goes well, his visit to the US this week will wow Americans with Saudi Arabia’s new progressivism, increase US investment in the Saudi economy, and align the US and Saudi strategies in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia Signals Ambition for \$80 Oil Price: Javier Blas, *Bloomberg*, Apr. 10, 2018—Saudi Arabia wants to get oil prices near \$80 a barrel to pay for the government’s crowded policy agenda and support the valuation of state energy giant Aramco before an initial public offering.

Qatar’s farewell to the GCC?: Stasa Salacanian, *Alarby*, Mar. 25, 2018—Last June, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain took an unprecedented action against a fellow GCC member, cutting all political, diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar. The GCC trio - joined by Egypt - accused Doha of endangering regional stability by allegedly supporting terrorist organisation and other Islamist movements, along with forging cordial relations with their arch-foe Iran.