

## Desert storm

The reformist Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's latest offering has taken the world by storm. In an interview to the influential US publication The Atlantic, the prince, who has virtually taken over the running of the country from his ailing father, said that "the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land".

Saudi Arabia still does not officially recognise Israel. Even though the country, in alignment with its big Western allies, has for nearly two decades quietly pushed a two-state solution and even spearheaded an Arab peace initiative, this was the bluntest acknowledgment so far that Israel can exist alongside Palestine. In doing so, the 32-year-old prince, known as MbS, publicly set aside nearly seven decades of Saudi opposition to the idea of Israel. With that one sentence, he also brushed aside the anti-semitism that is a matter of faith in Saudi Arabia, and in the radical Salafi and Wahabi versions of Islam that the country has exported the world over since 1979.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have been drawing closer over several years in response to common perceived enemy, Iran, and its role — along with that of Russia — in Syria, another common foe. In March, the kingdom allowed Air India flights to and from Tel Aviv to use its air space, an indication of the thaw in the ties between the two countries.

For now, the outreach strengthens Israel, with its potential to bring the Trump and Netanyahu administrations and Saudi Arabia on the same page, with Egypt and Jordan already Israeli allies. It remains to be seen if this will bring out the other Arab states with covert relations with Israel. And it increases the isolation of the Palestinians. Prince Salman's interview was published two days after a number of Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces during a protest over the blockade of Gaza.

Though the prince spoke of a "peace agreement to assure stability for everyone", he gave no specifics. It was left to his father King Salman to fill in the details with a reiteration of "the kingdom's steadfast position towards the Palestinian issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital".

Just as allowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia does not mean that the country is now the epitome of gender equality, Prince Salman's public acknowledgment of Israel's right is only one element towards a solution, that needs many, many other elements.

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