



COMMENTARY

# How Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Can Move the Needle on Middle Eastern Peace

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**A Gaza ceasefire is a start, but lasting peace depends on Saudi leverage to halt Israeli expansion, which could shift the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's trajectory for a generation.**

Ceasefires and hostage releases are hugely welcome, but they do not address the underlying motivations of conflict in the Middle East. The Gaza ceasefire is only a precondition to any hope of moving the needle on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has been the foundation of generations of tension in the region. President Donald Trump's goalpost moving talk of relocating 1.5 million Palestinians from Gaza to neighbouring countries is more punishment than peace, and anathema to Palestinians. But the alternative of a path to a two-state solution outlined most recently by departing Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in the present environment a non-starter for most Israelis. Still, Gaza's destruction and Trump's muscular opening gambit make it clear that there is an opportunity for game-changing diplomacy in the Middle East, which could even legitimately allow Trump to lay claim to the title of 'peacemaker'. No-one is more important to this opportunity than Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). With a Saudi normalisation with Israel high on the US wish list,

and Saudi's capacity to fund Gazan reconstruction, Saudi Arabia has what Trump craves in any deal – leverage.

To many, peace is myopically defined by the devastation of Hamas and Hezbollah, ceasefires, hostage releases and a non-fragmented Syria. All are welcome, but they only represent a cyclical break in the region's structural dysfunction. With Iran having changed the rules by raining missiles on Israel, and with the world unable to take a stable Syrian-Israeli border for granted, Trump needs to deliver more. The goal is not just ceasefires and Trump greeting hostages, but a lasting settlement acceptable to both Israel and Saudi Arabia that helps change the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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With so many obstacles to peace, it is premature to seek commitments to a two-state solution or even the restart of probably futile peace talks. The goal instead should be to address the not-so-subtle difference between Israel's 100% commitment to security, with its tangible disincentive to desiring peace with the Palestinians. Simply, Israel's continual territorial expansion rewards Israel for delaying peace, while simultaneously throwing fuel on the fire for those seeking to whip up anti-Israeli, and too often anti-Jewish sentiment. Peace is not a credible aspiration until Israel has kicked its habit of territorial expansion. Every incremental Palestinian home confiscated, olive grove uprooted and buffer zone created is a carcinogen that feeds regional instability.

Emptying Gaza of Palestinians is less a solution than a carcinogen on steroids. While Israel can continue arguing against ceding control of the occupied territories to Palestinians until it has a credible partner in peace, so long as Israel keeps taking more territory, it is not a credible partner for peace either.

This is where Saudi Arabia comes in. Given both US and Israeli desires for a Saudi-Israeli deal, MBS has tremendous leverage. How he uses this leverage will determine the outlook of the Middle East for the coming generation.



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If MBS resists a peace deal with Israel for fear of inflaming his population, the opportunity will be missed. At the other extreme, he could mimic the failure of the Abraham Accords by using leverage to selfishly obtain military, technological and economic benefits without demanding much of Israel in exchange. Yes, Trump will get the Saudi-Israeli deal he wants, but it will leave the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to fester. If MBS understands his game changing leverage, in exchange for normalising ties with Israel, he will not just ask for concessions from the US; he also needs to ask something fundamental of Israel. Specifically, a commitment that Israel will not expand further territorially.

In return for that concession and a greenlighting of a rebuilding of Gaza, Israel's reward will be a landmark Saudi alliance, brokered by their common ally, the US. It will also remove an obvious justification for anti-Israeli sentiment from Tehran to US college campuses. Is that enough for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to sacrifice the benefit of further territorial expansion? Probably not unless forced. But to keep matters in perspective, we

are not talking about 'rewarding terrorists' by Israel giving up any land or formally starting talks. That is all for the future. For now, all MBS needs to ask of Israel is a commitment that it will not take more land. While there will be pushback from hardliners, this non-expansionist commitment will not require any evictions of existing settlers or gains in Palestinian self-governance. It will simply create clarity about Israel's future intentions. Is it interested in peace and a Saudi deal? Or unwilling because it still wants to take more Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian land? If Israel cannot make this commitment, it will be admitting that it is a serious obstacle to peace in the region. If, however Israel relents and seeks rapprochement with Saudi in this way, it will be removing a longstanding deterrent to peace. With this condition, a Saudi-Israeli normalisation will dramatically increase the odds that Israelis and Palestinians will, eventually, talk constructively.

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A commitment from Israel for no further territorial expansion may seem well short of the current Saudi ask of a path to a two-state solution, but it's infinitely better than population transfers from Gaza and worth much more than empty talk of future deals. It is a structural game-changer that will remove Israel's disincentive to negotiating with the Palestinians. So long as Israel and Palestinians are not negotiating for peace, Israel will continue to take more territory to improve its negotiating position. Removing that benefit to Israel is arguably the single most important requirement to structurally improve the prospects for future peace in the Middle East. If MBS understands this, Saudi

Arabia will ask little more of Israel. If Netanyahu really cares about Israel's long-term security, and if he wants to make survival tougher for the leaders of Iran and other enemies of Israel, he should not only let his arm be twisted by Trump, but shaken by MBS on the White House lawn. After the Gaza ceasefire, many eyes are now on Damascus. But the road to a better foundation for regional stability does not end in Damascus; it leads to Riyadh via Jerusalem.

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## Footnotes