

# COMMENTARY

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## **Saudi-Israeli Rendezvous: Does it indicate a Policy Change?**

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The 22 July visit of a Saudi delegation led by retired Major General Anwar Eshki, head of the Jeddah-based Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, to Israel to meet Ambassador Dore Gold, the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, has raised many eyebrows. This is the first time that a Saudi delegation visited Israel. Though not an official visit, Eshki's is a highly symbolic one. Reportedly, the Saudi delegation also met Yaov Mordechai, the coordinator of Israeli government activities in the 'occupied territories', as well as a number of opposition Members of the Knesset including Meretz MKs Esawi Freig and Michal Rozin and Zionist Union MKs Ksenia Svetlova and Omer Bar-Lav, in order to encourage discussions in Israel on the Arab Peace Initiative.

This is not the first time that Eshki and Gold were meeting. Earlier, on 4 June, the two held discussions on opportunities and challenges in the Middle East at an event organized by the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC. And, in June 2015, they had met in public and since then have reportedly held several private meetings.

Eshki has not been the only prominent Saudi to hold meetings with an Israeli leader. In May 2016, the former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal and Israel's former national security advisor Major General Yaakov Amidror had held a debate on security and peace in the Middle East at the Washington Institute. In fact, Turki al-Faisal has in recent years publicly met a number of Israeli leaders including former Members of the Knesset Dan Meridor and Meir Sheerit, former IDF intelligence chief Amos Yaldin and even the Yesh Atid leader and former finance minister Yair Lapid. Turki has been one of the most prominent advocates of the 2002

Arab Peace Initiative, arguing that it is the only approach towards peace and the formation of a Palestinian state.

The various publicized contacts between Saudi and Israeli leaders are a result of the changing geopolitics in the Middle East brought about by a change in the US approach towards Iran. A publicized visit of a Saudi delegation to Israel is indicative of the changing Saudi stance towards Israel. Firstly, it shows a willingness to engage with Israel, a country with which the Kingdom has no diplomatic relations. While speculations about secret Saudi-Israeli counter-terrorism and intelligence exchanges cannot be confirmed, it would be naïve to believe that the two countries have no contacts, especially given their mutuality of interest vis-à-vis Iran and defeating terror. There is no doubt that concerns in both Israel and Saudi Arabia about Iran's ambitions and growing influence in the Middle East have brought these two adversaries of Iran closer.

Secondly, although the Palestinian issue is highly important as is evident from Eshki's statement during his visit – "There will be no peace with the Arab countries before there is peace with the Palestinians...If the conflict is resolved, the countries that exploit the Palestinian issue, namely Iran, will no longer be able to capitalize on it." – his public, even if unofficial, visit shows that Saudi Arabia is willing to take the risk of provoking domestic and Arab public anger by engaging with Israel. Saudi media did not highlight the visit, but, of late, there have been articulations about the need to engage with Israel to find a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to take the initiative from Iran as the benefactor of the Palestinian people. These views and moves have been impelled by the reduced US engagement in the region and the conclusion of a nuclear deal with Iran, which Saudi Arabia views as an American move to recognize Iran as a dominant regional player. Given the necessity of taking care of its own security under these circumstances, Saudi Arabia has begun to engage with all the players in the region including Israel. Though Eshki denied any knowledge about Saudi-Israeli counter-terrorism cooperation, such a possibility cannot be ruled out. One of the most potent threats to the Kingdom emanates from the Islamic State. Having some secret understanding with Israel, especially the sharing of intelligence and counter-terror experience, can be a major tool to deal with this threat.

The third important aspect of the meeting can be gleaned from the discussions reportedly held during Eshki's visit. Israeli media reports suggest that the discussion largely remained confined to reviving talks on the Saudi proposed Arab Peace Initiative, with Eshki articulating the need for Israel to work towards resolving the conflict. On being asked whether he sees Israel as the cause of terrorism in the region, Eshki said: "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the source of terrorism, but it does create fertile ground for acts of terrorism in the region." The efforts to revive the Arab Peace Initiative gains importance in the light of the recent statement by Benjamin Netanyahu that the initiative has some "positive elements that can help revive constructive negotiations with Palestinians." On an earlier occasion in 2015, he had remarked

that Israel is willing to discuss the Arab initiative if it is revised. Nonetheless, these are early days to discern the trend of things to come. It can lead to some secret discussions but may get derailed due to adverse public opinion in both countries.

Though the reaction to Eshki's visit within Saudi Arabia or in other parts of the region remains muted, there has been some criticism. For example, BDS Gulf issued a statement on 24 July denouncing the visit of the Eshki-led delegation. The statement read: "The Arab people, including in the Gulf, have always supported the people of Palestine against colonial and Zionist occupation and have opposed any violation of this support by their governments." It urged people in the Gulf region to oppose any efforts at reconciliation with Israel. It added that if, as denied by Saudi Arabia of any official status to the visit, then action should be taken against those who visited Israel. Such statements are, however, unlikely to deter the Saudis as they see Israel as a possible partner in countering Iran's growing clout in the region.

It is early days to speculate on the likely outcome and possible trajectory in Saudi-Israeli engagement, but Eshki's visit has so far been the clearest indication of Saudi willingness to engage with the Jewish state. These are interesting times in the Middle East and things can derail with one small flare up. But if media reports and speculations of clandestine Saudi-Israeli engagements are to be believed, important turns could occur including the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative and cooperation to counter common threat perceptions.

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