

Saudi Arabia, Israel negotiating Temple Mount control - report

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Palestinians pray on the first Friday of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, on the compound known to Muslims as Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as Temple Mount, in Jerusalem's Old City May 10, 2019. — (photo credit: AMMAR AWAD / REUTERS)

Saudi Arabia and Israel are conducting negotiations to allow Saudi representatives to join the Jerusalem Waqf Islamic religious trust that controls the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa, according to a report Monday by *Israel Hayom*.

"These are sensitive and secret discussions conducted with ambiguity and low intensity with a small team of diplomats and senior security officials from Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia as part of negotiations to progress the Deal of the Century," said senior Saudi diplomats to *Israel Hayom*.

While Jordan had strongly objected to any change in the makeup of the Waqf, in recent months their stance changed after Turkey became involved in east Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

After the clashes surrounding the Gate of Mercy complex and the attempt to install metal detectors at the Temple Mount, Jordan appointed Palestinian representatives to the Waqf. The Palestinian representatives began to allow Turkish organizations to operate on the Temple Mount by establishing foundations to which the Turkish government provides tens of millions of dollars, according to *Israel Hayom*.

As Turkish influence increased, the Jordanians told Israel and the US that the kingdom was ready to soften its stance concerning allowing Saudi representatives in the Waqf. The addition of Saudi representatives would occur under specific circumstances that won't impact the unique position held by the Jordanian kingdom on the Temple Mount and if Saudi Arabia provides millions of dollars as a contribution to Islamic foundations that operate in east Jerusalem and the Temple Mount and place diplomatic and political pressure to remove the Turkish

organizations from the area.

An Arab diplomat told *Israel Hayom* that if the Jordanians were to allow Turkey to operate on the Temple Mount without interfering, Jordan “would remain only ‘on paper’ in their definition in the special position of managing the holy places of Islam. They need money and the influence of Saudi Arabia in order to stop [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan.”

The diplomat added that Israel and the US have an interest in Saudi support in order to progress the Deal of the Century and the annexation process. “Moreover, Saudi Arabia brings with it the support of the UAE and Bahrain,” said the diplomat to *Israel Hayom*.

The diplomat stressed that it was still too early to say whether the Saudi representatives would actually be added to the Waqf. “The intention is that the integration of the Saudi delegates will be in the constellation of observers only and not binding, in order not to impact the special position of Jordan on the holy area,” said the diplomat to *Israel Hayom*.

The Temple Mount reopened on Sunday after closing in March due to the coronavirus outbreak. Eight Muslims were detained on the Temple Mount Sunday morning after they began shouting nationalistic slogans at a group of Jews visiting the site and tried to disrupt their visit, the police said.

Around 700 Muslim worshipers were present for dawn prayers on Sunday. In total, 206 Jews went up to the Temple Mount on Sunday morning, 147 in the morning visiting hours, and 59 in the afternoon.

According to Palestinian reports, a number of Palestinians from east Jerusalem were banned from entering the Temple Mount complex for a week on Sunday.

Reports of warming ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel have become more frequent in the past year.

In an interview with *Globes* in June of last year, a high-ranking Saudi diplomat stated “The blood conflict had lasted too long. Us Saudis and all Gulf States plus Egypt and Jordan realize that the age of going to war with Israel is over.”

Pointing to “the advantages of normalizing relations,” he argued that “the whole Arab world could benefit from it,” *Globes* reported.

Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, stated in February that “upgrading relations with Israel will occur only when a peace agreement is signed and is in accordance with Palestinian conditions.”

When the Trump administration’s Deal of the Century peace plan was released, Saudi Arabia was among the countries that expressed support for the plan.

“The Kingdom reiterates its support for all efforts aimed at reaching a just and comprehensive resolution to the Palestinian cause,” said the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“The kingdom appreciates the efforts of President Trump’s administration to

develop a comprehensive peace plan between the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, and encourages the start of direct peace negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, under the auspices of the United States,” the statement reads.

It also called to resolve any disagreements with aspects of the plan through negotiations, “to move forward the peace process to reach an agreement that achieves legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.”

Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad Bin Salman told Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas that “our position towards the Palestinian issue has not changed, all the Arabs, and we are with you. The establishment of a just and comprehensive peace must be worked for. Peace is a strategic choice, which will bring a permanent solution that will fulfill the rights of the Palestinian people,” according to Channel 13.

In an interview with German newspaper Der Spiegel in May, Jordan’s King Abdullah II stated, “In the Arab League, the one-state solution is still completely rejected. When the one-state plan was published six or seven months ago, his highness, the King of Saudi Arabia, said, ‘no, we are with the Palestinians.’”

Omri Nahmias, Jeremy Sharon, Reuters, and Gideon Kouts/Maariv contributed to this report.

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