

Saudi outreach to Israel 'faces setbacks' after Khashoggi crisis

WSJ says Saudi effort to forge ties with Israel is sputtering after crown prince was implicated in journalist's murder.



Prince Mohammed's role has weakened after Khashoggi's murder, the Wall Street Journal wrote [File: Sergio Moraes/ Reuters]

A covert US-backed initiative to improve ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel is facing setbacks after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and two of his aides were implicated in a journalist's killing, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Prince Mohammed, who the US Senate blamed for Jamal Khashoggi's killing in October, spearheaded the outreach to Israel, a longtime foe, the Journal said in a report on Tuesday.

But the global outcry over Khashoggi's murder in October and a fallout within the royal court has diminished the prince's influence and dampened Saudi Arabia's appetite for risky foreign policy endeavors, the Journal said, citing people familiar with the matter.

"Things have definitely cooled off right after Khashoggi's murder," a senior Saudi

government official told the Journal.

“The last thing the kingdom wants is for this to come out now and cause another backlash.”

Saudi Arabia does not officially recognise Israel and King Salman, who has taken a more active role in government in the aftermath of the Khashoggi crisis, recently described resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict as the kingdom’s “foremost priority” in the region.

The effort to improve Riyadh’s ties with Israel was also hindered, the Journal reported, when two close advisers to Prince Mohammed lost their jobs over their suspected role in Khashoggi’s murder.

The two aides, former royal court adviser Saud al-Qahtani and former deputy intelligence chief Ahmed al-Assiri played key roles in behind-the-scenes contact between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the Journal said, citing people familiar with their work.

Al-Qahtani issued directives to the Saudi press to help soften Israel’s image and was also involved in the kingdom’s purchase of advanced surveillance technology from Israeli firms, the Journal said, citing unnamed Saudi officials.

Meanwhile, Al-Assiri, a subordinate to Al-Qahtani, secretly travelled to Israel several times in order to discuss how Saudi Arabia could benefit from Israeli technology, according to the Journal.

That makes him the most senior Saudi official known to have reportedly set foot in the country.

Despite the setback, the Saudis and Israelis were likely to continue building ties in secret, the Journal said, because of shared business and security interests.

It added that the Saudi government has been considering an investment of at least \$100m in various Israeli technology companies and begun issuing a special waiver to Israeli businessmen that allows them to travel to the kingdom on special documents, without using their Israeli passports.

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