**The Road to Al-Aqsa**

*Abd-al-Hamid al-Ghabin*

Saudis often quote a statement by Muhammad bin Salman: “Success stories always start with a vision. The most successful visions are those founded on reservoirs of power.”

The question of whether everyone – Israelis and Arabs – will keep seeking the same problematic solutions, as they have over and over again for 70 years, over the same demands and with the same outcomes, remains unanswered. Did the Jewish scientist Einstein not say that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results”?

Everyone has followed the wrong path and there is no doubt that this has hindered development, cooperation, and stability. Everyone has delved into the past in search of their historic rights, when they ought to have dealt with reality in order to secure the present and build for the future. Today, we have to offer a new and realistic vision. But before we can put that vision forward, we have to recognize the new face of Saudi Arabia —one that is capable of creating miracles. Yes miracles! Saudi Arabia is the spiritual reservoir of power in the Islamic world, the lungs of its economy, and the greatest source of its energy.

If we look at the miracle His Royal Highness Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has brought about in Saudi society, we can see him for the historical figure that he is. He has managed to change and renew the ideas of a closed society, recognizing the narrow-minded religious perspective that the Muslim Brotherhood has cultivated for 50 years for what it is: one that rejects all the values of modernity and turns women into objects, devoid of rights. It is the mentality of a community that was built on *takfir*, on falsely deeming others to be non-Muslims, even though they are. It views the Jews as the root of all the evil, scourges, and humiliation that the Arab nation has experienced. It promotes hate speech and judging others by their doctrines, intellectual background, and ethnicity, not their value as human beings.

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is a leader capable of making history by stepping through the gateway of peace and ending the decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict that for too long has been spinning in an endless void. In two short years, he has been able to enact substantive change, rebuilding and radically reshaping Saudi society. He has empowered women to drive, made them free to work and travel, and has abolished the laws of guardianship—meaning, control—over them. He has allowed all forms of art, culture, and music, and permitted foreigners to visit Saudi Arabia without restrictions, which was once forbidden. This is beyond imagination; it is magical. If you had asked anyone, however fertile his imagination, even five years ago, he would have told you that this was an impossible dream. Yet Muhammad bin Salman has achieved it, through his sheer courage and with the full support of the people.

The peace-loving people in this region torn by war and extremism have placed their hope in this brave young prince to end conflict and replace it with peace and prosperity. Senior scholars of great standing in Saudi society and the Muslim community, such as Sheikh Abd-al-Aziz bin Baz, the late head of the Council of Senior Scholars and Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, have endorsed reconciliation with the Jews in accordance with the requirements of the Crown Prince’s legitimate authority. Many Saudi and Muslim scholars have no objection to establishing diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict was a delusion fed solely by certain parties and dictatorial regimes that wanted to remain in power, and to enforce their tyranny, by raising the banner of liberating Palestine. The slogan and narrative of liberating Palestine is no longer realistic. We should erase it from the dictionary and recognize that Israel is an independent state, part of the region, and an important element in establishing stability and security; in this light, we have great interest in partnering with Israel. Muhammad bin Salman has been the only Arab leader in history to affirm the right of the Jews to have their national homeland. “I believe that every people, anywhere, has the right to live in their homeland,” he told the American magazine *The Atlantic*. “I believe that Palestinians and Israelis have the right to their own land.”

But what about Jerusalem or, more precisely, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a holy site for both Muslims and Jews? For 70 years, the Arabs have not wanted to address this issue realistically. Indeed, most dictators, from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Saddam Hussein, have used it as a slogan, manipulating phony emotions in order to consolidate their power. The consequences have been catastrophic for the Arab nation. Today, Iran is destroying Arab states under this banner.

Realism means acknowledging that no Arab state in its present form existed before Israel did, and that its independence preceded that of most Arab countries. Jordan has failed to administer properly this holy place, to develop it and turn it into an attractive site for religious tourism, peace, and tolerance, rather than a platform for hatred. It is time for it to be under Saudi administration, managed along with the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia has great ideas for the Temple Mount, to turn it into a tourist landmark and a center of peace and love, to connect these holy places – Mecca, Medina, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque – by train, so that pilgrims, visitors, and tourists can visit them all in one day, thereby developing the economy and employment opportunities on all sides.

Arab and particularly Saudi public opinion today no longer rejects peace or the multifaceted evolution of ideas, and has begun to see peace without preconditions as the best option for development and success. If we consider the recent move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, we see that the Arabs did not go out to protest or condemn it. This shows that Arab public opinion has changed towards the Palestinian issue and has begun to acknowledge Israel and its right to exist. Peace between the Arabs and Israel will also check Iran and the terrorist organizations that are devastating the Arab world, shattering the dreams of millions and rendering millions more homeless. As Saudis, we feel gratitude towards Israel, which has shown itself to behave particularly honorably toward Saudi Arabia during critical moments of public agitation against the Kingdom over Khashoggi and other issues. Israel’s position was also much better than that of Arab countries when Iran struck Aramco, and Israel remains ready to confront Iran alongside Saudi Arabia. These are all positions that demonstrate to us that Israel today is a friendly country and no longer an enemy state.

 Sometimes, we need to assuage our pain and put an end to futile wars and feelings of hatred that could continue for coming generations. Today we find ourselves in a moment in history when we can achieve peace, especially with such a great leader as Muhammad bin Salman, someone who will continue to be an outstanding historic figure for a long time to come. He is the one person capable of taking historic decisions and reaching a comprehensive peace with Israel. Such a peace will be unique because it will rely on popular support. It will be a people’s peace more than a political one, and Israel’s leadership must recognize and seize this brilliant historic moment.

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