**The Road to Al-Aqsa**

*Abd-al-Hamid al-Ghabin*

Saudis often quote something said by Muhammad bin Salman: “Success stories always start with a vision. The most successful visions are those founded on reservoirs of power.” The question that has remained without answer is whether everyone – Israelis and Arabs – are going to seek the same problematic solutions, as has repeatedly happened for 70 years, over the same demands and with the same outcomes. 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 delved into the past in search of historical rights when they ought to have dealt with reality in order to consolidate the present and build for the future. Today, we have to offer a new and realistic vision, but before we can put that forward, we have to recognize the new face of Saudi Arabia, one that is capable of creating miracles, yes miracles! It is the spiritual reservoir of power in the Islamic world, the lungpower of its economy, and the greatest source of its energy.

If we look at the miracle realized by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi society, we can see a history maker in him. He is someone who has managed to change the ideas of an enclosed society for new ones, to see the world of 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 deeming the other to be not a Muslim, even though they were. It is the view of the Jews as the root of all the evil, the scourges, and the humiliation that the Arab nation experiences. It has promoted hate speech and dealing with the other based on their doctrinal, intellectual, and ethnic background, not their value as a human.

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is a leader capable of making history via the gateway of peace and ending the decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict that spins around in an endless void. He has been able to realize change in two years, rebuilding Saudi society and radically reshaping it. He has empowered women to drive, to be free to work and travel, and has abolished the laws of guardianship over them, that is of commandment over them. He has allowed all forms of art, culture, and song and foreigners to visit Saudi Arabia without restriction, when this was once forbidden. That is beyond all 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 just an impossible dream. Yet Muhammad bin Salman has achieved this, both through his sheer courage and 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 with great status 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 see no objection to establishing a diplomatic, economic, and cultural relationship with Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict was a delusion fed only by certain parties and dictatorships that wanted to remain in power, to practice their tyranny, and raise the banner of liberating Palestine. This 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 that we have great interest in partnering with. Muhammad bin Salman has been the only Arab leader in history to affirm the right of the Jews to have their national homeland. He told *The Atlantic* American magazine: “I believe that every people, anywhere, has the right to live in their homeland. I believe that Palestinians and Israelis have the right to own their land.”

But what about Jerusalem or, more precisely, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is religiously symbolic for both Muslims and Jews too? For 70 years, the Arabs have not wanted to deal with this issue realistically. Indeed, most dictators have made a slogan of it based on phony emotions in order to consolidate their power. The consequences have been catastrophic for the Arab nation, from Gamal Abdel Nasser thru to Saddam Hussein. Today, Iran is destroying many of the Arab states under this banner. Realism is to acknowledge 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 this holy place properly, to develop it and turn it into an attractive place for religious tourism and site of peace and tolerance, rather than a platform for hatred. It is time for it to be under Saudi administration and for its management to join that of 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, thus developing the economy and employment opportunities on all sides.

Arab and particularly Saudi public opinion today no longer rejects peace or the evolution of ideas in a variety of ways and has begun to see peace without conditions as the best option for development and success. If we go back a little while to the transfer of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, we see that the Arabs did not go out to protest against or condemn it. This is something that 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 stand in the way of 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, since significant events have shown it to behave particularly honorably with Saudi Arabia in matters 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.

We sometimes need to cure our pain and put an end to futile wars and feelings of hatred through the coming generations. We are today at a moment in history when we can achieve peace, especially with such a great leader as Muhammad bin Salman, someone who will himself stand out in history for a long time to come. He is the one person capable of taking historic decisions and agreeing a comprehensive peace with Israel. Such a peace will be entirely distinctive because its essence will lie in popular support. It will be a people’s peace more than a political one and Israel’s leadership must both recognize this shining historic moment and seize hold of it.

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