

## Saudi Arabia appoints first envoy to Palestinians

Move comes as US attempts to broker deal to normalise relations between Riyadh and Israel



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Saudi Arabia has long supported Palestinians' desire for a state of their own © Hamad I Mohammed/Reuters

**James Shotter** in Jerusalem and **Samer Al-Atrush** in Dubai YESTERDAY

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Saudi Arabia has appointed its first ever ambassador to the Palestinians, amid a flurry of diplomatic activity as the US attempts to broker an agreement to normalise relations between Riyadh and Israel.

Over the past three months, US and Saudi officials have been exploring the potential for a complex deal that would reshape the Middle East's geopolitics and see Saudi Arabia recognise Israel in exchange for US defence guarantees and support for a civilian nuclear programme.

As part of any deal, the Saudis are also expected to demand Israeli concessions to Palestinian aspirations for statehood, and on Saturday the Gulf nation appointed Nayef bin Bandar Al-Sudairi as non-resident ambassador to the Palestinians and consul-general in Jerusalem.

Al-Sudairi, who already serves as Saudi ambassador to Jordan, said the expansion of his role was a sign of solidarity with the Palestinians.

“This is an important step and shows that the [Saudi king and crown prince] are keen to strengthen ties with the brothers in the state of Palestine,” he said. “This step will have consequences that will benefit the brothers in Palestine and organise those relations and formalise them.”

Asked about the Saudi move on Sunday by Israeli radio station 103FM, Israel’s foreign minister, Eli Cohen, said it had not been co-ordinated with Israel, and added that Israel would “not allow the opening of any diplomatic representation [to the Palestinians] in Jerusalem”.

Saudi Arabia, widely regarded as one of the leaders of the Sunni Muslim world, has long supported Palestinians’ desire for a state of their own. In 2002, it masterminded an Arab peace initiative that offered to recognise Israel — but only if it withdrew from occupied Arab lands.

Bassam Al-Agha, the Palestinian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said the appointment of Al-Sudairi was a sign of Riyadh’s continued support for the Palestinian cause, and its desire to deepen political, social and economic ties with the Palestinians.

Cohen conceded that the Saudi move was “a message to the Palestinians that they didn’t forget them”. But he played down its significance for the broader efforts to normalise ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and said that, despite numerous obstacles, he still thought a deal could be reached.

“It’s complex, but possible,” he said. “What matters in the end are interests. Saudi Arabia has an interest in an agreement, no less than Israel.”

In addition to winning support from the Israeli and Saudi governments, any deal would also need approval in Washington, and officials say that it would need to be reached in the next six to nine months to avoid being caught up in the US election cycle.

A senior US official said earlier this week that there were “still a lot of conversations that have to occur” before a deal could be struck, adding that there was “no agreed to set of negotiations” or “agreed-to framework to codify normalisation”.