

Imam of Great Mosque in Mecca Hints at Normalization with Israel

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque has given a hint that Saudi Arabia may be moving toward normalization of ties with Israel. The story of his unusual sermon is [here](#).

The imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque appeared to hint at normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia in a sermon delivered on Friday, September 4.

Following the Israeli accord with the United Arab Emirates last month, speculation has been rampant on whether Saudi Arabia would follow suit.

So far the Saudis have neither praised, as Bahrain, Egypt, and Oman have done, the UAE decision to normalize relations with

Israel, nor denounced it, as have the Palestinians, Iran, and Turkey.

The Saudi king has spoken of normalization, but only after Israel has withdrawn back to the 1949 armistice lines. This is in accord with the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which was first formulated by the Saudis. This glass may be seen as half-empty: Israel, of course, will never allow itself to be squeezed back into those 1949 lines, that Abba Eban famously described as “the lines of Auschwitz,” and so peace, and normalization, between Israel and Saudi Arabia may remain out of reach. Or the glass may be seen as half-full, because the Saudis have, very deliberately, not criticized, even mildly, the UAE for its normalization policy. And what’s more, the Saudis have seemed to signal mild approval for the peace-for-peace agreement by giving Israeli planes the right to fly in Saudi airspace to and from the UAE

The New Arab, a London-based, Qatari-funded private media outlet, [reported](#) over the weekend that Abdul Rahman al-Sudais used his sermon to emphasize tolerance and cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

In particular, he cited instances in which the prophet Muhammad had friendly relationships with Jews.

The prophet had mortgaged his shield to a Jew when he died; he had shared harvest from the land of the Jews of Khaybar,” he said. “The excellence he showed to his Jewish neighbor led the latter to Islam.”

Surely the Saudi royals – especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has understood the great value of cooperation with Israel on security matters – gave the imam of the Grand Mosque his marching orders, or rather, supplied him with his talking points, asking him from now on to accentuate the positive in telling about Muhammad’s friendly relations with Jews. So the imam told the story of Muhammad’s sharing “the harvest from

the land of the Jews of Khaybar” – a curious choice of story, as Muhammad attacked the Jews of Khaybar, slaughtering them, seizing their land, and taking their women as sex slaves. When he saw the 17-year-old Jewish girl Safiyya bint Huyayy, whose father and husband had been killed by the Muslims, and who had been appropriated by one of his followers as a sex slave, Muhammad promptly claimed her as his own, then manumitted her and made her his wife. The harvest Muhammad shared with a Jew was from the “land of the Jews of Khaybar” – presumably, after he had seized their land, and the Jews had been reconciled to their vanquished state. It’s not exactly a heartening tale of interfaith outreach and breaking-bread-together. And the tale of the “excellence” (kindness, fair dealing) Muhammad showed a Jewish neighbor “led him [the neighbor] to Islam” is a story that reinforces Muslim supremacism: the greatest good you can do for an Infidel is to lead him to embrace Islam.

Mohammed al-Sagheer, an Egyptian Islamic scholar, strongly condemned al-Sudais’ sermon, saying, “He is paving the way for normalization and treason from the holy Meccan pulpit.”

Some other users on social media also reacted angrily to the sermon, saying that it would lead to further normalization between Israel and Muslim countries.

All Al-Sudais is doing is following orders from above, as Mohammed al-Sagheer well knows, but the Egyptian Islamic “scholar” prefers not to take on the Saudi royals directly. Al-Sagheer, in that paranoid Muslim way, does not see this sermon as merely an awkward effort to increase tolerance for Jews in the Kingdom, by telling tales that showed Muhammad, the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct, on some occasions managing to behave decently toward them; he warns darkly that Al-Sudais is “paving the way” not just for “normalization” (which would be bad enough) but also for “treason.” Except this time Al-Sagheer is not being paranoid. I think he’s exactly right: this is a case of the Saudi royals using Al-

Sudais' sermon, and others that will surely follow, as a way to begin preparing the Kingdom's people for a campaign to soften Saudi hearts toward Jews, not necessarily because normalization with Israel will take place tomorrow, but because such normalization may be judged useful in furthering Saudi national interests the day after tomorrow, and the mental ground for popular acceptance of such a move has to be prepared well in advance.

We could, of course, correct the rosy version offered by the Great Mosque's imam. We could quote dozens of Qur'anic verses denouncing the Jews, as the worst enemies of the Muslims. We could tell the story of Muhammad's assault on the Jews of Khaybar, his seizing of the Jewish girl Safiya, after his men had killed her husband and father. We could tell about his personally taking part in the execution of 600-900 members of the Banu Qurayza, a Jewish tribe. We could refer to his treatment of the Banu Qainuqa and Banu Nadir, two Jewish tribes who were expelled "with their families and possessions" from Medina. We could note the pleasure Muhammad took on learning of the killing, by his followers, of those who had mocked him, including two Jewish poets, 120-year-old Abu 'Afak and Ka'b bin al-Ashraf.

Yes, we could do all of that, but why encourage Muslims to continue swimming in the swamp of Islamic antisemitism? If Imam Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, at the behest of the Saudi royals, is willing to present a friendly-to-Jews side to Muhammad, should we try to set things straight, or in a spirit of war-is-deceit, let the deception stand, as it could make things better for the real Jews who must live and survive and arrive at some kind of modus vivendi with their neighbors in the Middle East? I think we should not correct but quietly applaud Al-Sudais, and hope that his version of Muhammad, delusive as it may be, is accepted and spreads, throughout the Arabian peninsula, and even beyond.

First published in