

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia launches ferocious state media attack on Benjamin Netanyahu

Onslaught points to growing frustration in Gulf state's royal court with Israeli prime minister and war in Gaza



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, right, with US President Donald Trump at the White House last week © Somodevilla/Getty Images

Ahmed Al Omran in Riyadh YESTERDAY

Saudi Arabia has launched a scathing state media campaign against Benjamin Netanyahu, pointing to growing frustration in the Gulf state's royal court with the Israeli prime minister and the war in Gaza.

The unusually hostile barrage, which could only have been published with authorities' approval, came after US and Israeli officials talked up the prospects of [Saudi Arabia](#) normalising relations with Israel, despite Riyadh's insistence that this would depend on the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The onslaught was triggered by [Netanyahu](#) joking in an interview last week about creating a Palestinian state in Saudi Arabia.

After a presenter at Israel's Channel 14 mistakenly said there would be no progress in normalising relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel without the establishment of a Saudi state, Netanyahu corrected him by saying: "[You mean] a Palestinian state".

"Unless you want the Palestinian state to be in Saudi Arabia," he added. "They have a lot of territory."

State media responded ferociously, reflecting anger that has simmered for months among senior officials and the public.

A report on state news channel Al Ekhbariya pointedly described Netanyahu as a “Zionist and the son of a Zionist . . . who inherited extremism in his genes”. It added: “Occupation does not have a good face or an ugly face. It has only one face and it is Benjamin Netanyahu.”

The Saudi-owned Al Arabiya channel aired a talk show in which the presenter raised questions about Netanyahu’s mental state. “Maybe it was a case of hallucination?” the anchor asked.

A columnist for the Okaz daily called the Israeli prime minister’s comments “silly and ridiculous”, while pro-government pundits on social media called Netanyahu the “rotten one”, a wordplay on his name in Arabic.

Saudi Arabian anger has been thrust into the open as Riyadh is expected to face pressure from US President Donald Trump to normalise relations with Israel. Like other Arab states, the kingdom has also been rattled by Trump’s insistence that Palestinians should be forced out of Gaza.

Saudi Arabia was closing in on a three-way deal with Joe Biden’s administration before Hamas’s October 7 2023 attack. The kingdom would have agreed to formal diplomatic relations with Israel in return for a US defence pact and assistance with a nuclear programme.

The war in Gaza shook up those plans. Riyadh never took normalisation off the table, but has escalated its condemnation of Israel’s conduct of its war in Gaza and has hardened its position, insisting Israel would need to take irreversible steps towards a two-state solution.

In September, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman went further, telling the consultative Shura Council that the kingdom would not recognise Israel without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state including Gaza and the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital.





Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The kingdom swiftly rejected Trump's plan in a strongly worded statement © Nathan Howard/POOL/AFP/Getty Images

Saudi Arabian officials have privately expressed exasperation over what they view as offensive and presumptive comments by Netanyahu and his far-right allies suggesting the kingdom would not only take in displaced Palestinians, but would also eventually accept conditions for normalisation far weaker than their stated demand of an independent Palestinian state.

“There is a complete disregard for the statements that Saudi officials make, [and this makes the Saudis appear as] basically not credible people, people that are two-faced and very conspiratorial. It’s certainly an outrage,” said Aziz Alghashian, a Saudi Arabian analyst and director of research and geopolitics at ORF Middle East, a Dubai-based think-tank.

“They [Riyadh] are trying to use this opportunity to give Netanyahu a taste of his own medicine.”

Netanyahu has claimed Saudi Arabia would follow in the footsteps of the neighbouring United Arab Emirates which, along with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, established diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020.

Those deals, sealed during Trump’s first term and dubbed the Abraham Accords, delivered negligible benefits for Palestinians.

Trump has said he would like to extend the accords to include Saudi Arabia, which as a leader of the Sunni Muslim world is considered the key prize.

Prince Mohammed enjoyed strong ties with Trump during his first term, and there have been some indications that Riyadh wants to pick up where it left off. The crown prince told the president this month that the kingdom planned to [invest more than \\$600bn](#) in the US over four years.

But Trump shocked Arab states last week by saying not only that Gaza should be

[emptied of Palestinians](#), but also that the US should take over the strip.

Saudi Arabian foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan last week postponed a scheduled trip to Washington after the US president announced his plan, a person familiar with the matter said.

The kingdom also swiftly rejected Trump's plan in a strongly worded statement released at 4am local time, saying: "Achieving lasting and just peace is impossible without the Palestinian people obtaining their legitimate rights in accordance with international resolutions, as has been previously clarified to both the former and current US administrations."

Ali Shihabi, a Saudi commentator close to the royal court, said "the whole ship is going in the wrong direction now".

"People were expecting that Trump would come along and we would advance along a two-state track, but Trump has taken it in a completely different direction and Netanyahu is trying to take advantage of that," he added.

"The Israelis have a powerful PR machine, and when they continue to say that behind closed doors the Saudis are giving us a different message, Riyadh realises it has to be much more proactive in disputing that."

The Saudi leadership is also concerned about the rage that the war in Gaza has fuelled among a generation of young Arabs.

"Saudi officials are certainly accounting for the growing public anger among younger Saudis but also among a younger Muslim population, globally," said Elham Fakhro, research fellow at the Middle East Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School. "This is another reason why Saudi officials have doubled down on Palestinian statehood."

Additional reporting by James Shotter in Jerusalem and Andrew England in London

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