

An October Surprise?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Here's an idea for an October Surprise that could transform the political landscape.

It has nothing to do with the announcement of a coronavirus vaccine. Nor with Black Lives Matter. Nor with defunding the police. Nor with once-in-a-century wildfires and hurricanes that, in their intensity, happened to be just like those wildfires and hurricanes we've endured for three – or is it four? – of the last five years. Nor is it about confirming Amy Coney Barrett as the replacement for the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

It has to do, rather, with that unfolding drama in the Middle East, where the trailblazing United Arab Emirates decided to both recognize, and normalize relations with, Israel, and Bahrain soon followed suit. Now the Internet is full of prognostications as to which Arab or Muslim state might be next. Oman? Sudan? Comoros? Chad? Djibouti? Mauritania?

Morocco? Kuwait? *Faites vos jeux, mesdames et messieurs.* Place your bets.

Eight states so far have been mentioned as candidates and given a thumbs up here and a pollice verso there. This one possibly worth the wait, says Pundit X, while that one has been weighed and found wanting, says Pundit Y. To have a memorable effect, to make it truly an October surprise, we need a definite dark horse, a country that has recently renewed its pledge to observe the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which means no recognition, much less normalization, of relations with Israel, until the Jewish state has been squeezed back within the 1949 armistice lines, and a Palestinian state established. That country, of course, is Saudi Arabia.

King Salman has been very clear that for now he is sticking with that 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. His son and heir apparent, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has given enough hints that he has other ideas. He has said that Israelis have the "right to live peacefully on their own land" which, in Saudi terms, is earth-shattering. There are signs that the Crown Prince is preparing the ground for recognition of Israel.

One such sign is a sermon delivered by Abdul Rahman Ibn Abdul Aziz al-Sudais, the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Al-Sudais has hitherto been well-known for weeping dozens of times while praying for Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and for denouncing the Jews. Here's a sample of his antisemitic invective:

"Read the history and you will know that yesterday's Jews were bad predecessors and today's Jews are worse successors. They are killers of prophets and the scum of the earth. God hurled his curses and indignation on them and made them monkeys and pigs and worshippers [sic] of tyrants. These are the Jews, a continuous lineage of meanness, cunning, obstinacy, tyranny,

evil, and corruption....May God's curses follow them until the Day of Judgement....Thus, they deserve the curse of God, His angels, and all people." Al-Sudais has prayed to God to "terminate" the Jews and has claimed, in a classic example of projection, given that Al-Aqsa was built on top of the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, that the Israelis aspire to tear down the al-Aqsa mosque and build their temple upon its ruins.

Yet this same imam gave a sermon on September 5 calling for religious tolerance, especially for Jews. He mentioned how Muhammad had been so good to a Jewish neighbor that the man converted to Islam. This was no doubt a command performance – that is, commanded by the Crown Prince, as a way of preparing the Saudi public, for some time in the future, when the Saudis will themselves "normalize" relations with Israel. Is it conceivable that the Crown Prince did not keep King Salman informed about this? Not very likely. Perhaps the King is not as completely opposed to normalization as he allows himself to show.

Another sign of change in Saudi views is that there was no denunciation by the Saudis of the UAE's move. Nor was anything done to stop Bahrain from following suit. The Emir of Bahrain relies on the Saudis for security; he would not have recognized Israel without first getting permission from Riyadh. That permission is one sign of approval. And it likely would have had to come from the very top. Another such sign of a lessening of hostility toward Israel is the permission that Saudi Arabia immediately granted for Israel to use its airspace for flights to and from the UAE. Again, this is the kind of thing that the Crown Prince would have informed the King about, and who apparently did not object.

Why would King Salman agree to recognize and normalize relations with Israel in October, after he had scarcely a month before reaffirmed his commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative? One reason is not to lose face. If more Arab

states – in spite of the Saudi stance – nonetheless normalize relations, those swelling numbers would suggest that Saudi Arabia, the Guardian of the Two Holy Sanctuaries, has lost some of its previous authority. The King may be persuaded that it is wiser to anticipate which way the political current is flowing, and not try to stand athwart it, but rather to go with the flow.

A second reason for the King to agree to this would be his recognition that after his death, the Crown Prince – who would then be King Mohammed bin Salman – is almost certain to normalize relations with Israel. If the King continues to insist now on avoiding such a move, then after his death his son Muhammad may be open to attack for “betraying” King Salman’s policy. The Crown Prince has already made serious enemies, because of the Saudi royals he kept locked up in 2018 for months – and some, like Turki bin Abdullah, for over a year – in a luxury hotel, the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton, until they disgorged some of what the Crown Prince thought were their ill-gotten gains. If King Salman wants to smooth his son’s ascension and assure his reign, he might be willing to demonstrate his support by now agreeing, however reluctantly, to the normalization policy.

A third reason for the Saudis to announce their change in policy is out of gratitude to the Trump Administration, which has stood by the Saudis despite Congressional anger over both the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and the civilian deaths caused by Saudi bombing in Yemen. Such an announcement, the Saudis know, should help Trump on November 3. If he wins, partly as a result of running as a “Middle East Peacemaker” who “managed to persuade even the Saudis,” he’ll know whom to thank.

That’s my candidate for the October Surprise. What’s yours?

First published in