

# Israel News Digest



Christian Friends of Israel

cfi@cfijerusalem.org

www.cfijerusalem.org

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## “There Is No Occupation”



**Abdullah Al-Hadlaq** (photo via Memri.com [Middle East Media Research Institute], Source: Al-Rai TV, Kuwait).

Amid a quiet thawing of relations between Israel and more moderate Arab states, a leading Kuwaiti journalist this month sparked public outrage when he dared to get real about the Jewish state.

Writer Abdullah Al-Hadlaq was taking part in a panel discussion on Kuwait's Alrai TV when he not only rejected the notion that Israel is an occupying power, but went so far as to accept the legitimacy of the Jews' return to their ancient homeland.

He went on to heap praise on the advanced and progressive Jewish state, which puts to shame most of its Arab neighbors. In remarks translated by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Al-Hadlaq said: “When the State of Israel was established in 1948, there was no state called ‘Palestine.’”

“Like it or not, Israel is an independent sovereign state. It exists, and it has a seat at the United Nations, and most peace-loving and democratic countries recognize it. The group of states that do not recognize Israel are the countries of tyranny and oppression. “For example, North Korea does not recognize Israel, but this does nothing to detract from Israel or from the fact of its existence, whether we like it or not. The State of Israel has scientific centers and universities the likes of which even the oldest and most powerful Arab countries lack. So Israel is a state and not a terror organization. “There is no occupation. There is a people returning to its promised land. Are you aware that the history of the Israelites is ancient, predating Islam? Therefore, we Muslims must acknowledge that the Israelites have a right to that land, and that they have not plundered it.”

### Saudi Prince Counters Iran

Saudi Arabia's powerful crown prince relies on a small core group of advisers, none more provocative than Thamer al-Sabhan, the fiercely anti-Iran government minister whose fingerprints were on the hurried and ultimately unsuccessful resignation of Lebanon's prime minister earlier this month. As Saudi minister for Gulf affairs, Sabhan has a hand in helping shape the kingdom's high-stakes effort to counter rival Iran.

For days before Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's surprise resignation, which the kingdom is widely believed to have orchestrated, Sabhan issued threats via Twitter against Lebanon's government as well as Iran and its ally Hezbollah, unnerving many Lebanese who feared being dragged yet again into the forefront of the Saudi-Iran rivalry for regional supremacy. Three months earlier, Sabhan had been sent to Beirut to meet with Hariri and deliver a blunt warning against concessions that could favor Iran's allies in Lebanon.



**Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud.**

(via The White House, Wikipedia.com, CC-PD-Mark 1.0).

Hariri's resignation, announced from Riyadh on November 4 on a Saudi-owned TV station, seemed to confirm fears that the kingdom's rivalry with Iran could destabilize yet another country in the region, this time Lebanon's delicate power-sharing system. Mediation by France, a close ally of both Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, helped reverse the resignation, which Hariri suspended after his return to Beirut.



**Lebanese PM Hariri with Saudi Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan** (via [twitter.com @saadhariri](https://twitter.com/saadhariri), Oct. 31, 2017).

Though Saudi Arabia may have succeeded in pressuring Hezbollah and bringing attention to the Shiite militant group's expanding regional footprint, the kingdom's political moves in Lebanon may have failed. The 50-year-old Sabhan was at the center of it all. Sabhan's first trip to Washington, in March, was with Mohammed bin Salman, who just months later would be named crown prince and heir to the Saudi throne. It was a pivotal visit that would cement Riyadh's relationship with the newly inaugurated US President Donald Trump.

A subsequent trip to Washington earlier this month, however, didn't go as well. Days after Hariri's resignation, Sabhan met with officials from the US State Department, Pentagon and the White House National Security Council. Instead of raising support for the resignation, Sabhan was given an earful from US officials who chided him and pressed him to stop his provocative tweets. They also asked who gave Sabhan the right to undermine Lebanon's stability at a time when Washington was backing the Lebanese armed forces and the country was hosting more than a million Syrian refugees.

The 32-year-old Saudi crown prince's hawkish policies toward Iran are largely embodied and amplified in Sabhan. Nowhere is that spelled out more clearly than on Twitter, where Sabhan has referred to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah – which means “Party of God” in Arabic – as the “Party of Satan.”

A few days before Hariri's resignation, Sabhan warned in an interview with a Lebanese TV station that there would be “astonishing” developments to topple the Shiite militant group in Lebanon. He also said that Lebanon's government – headed by Hariri – would be dealt with as a hostile government that's declared war against Saudi Arabia because of Hezbollah's power-sharing role.

“It is up to (Lebanon's) leaders to decide whether it is a state of terror or peace,” Sabhan wrote on Twitter two days after Hariri's resignation. Sabhan, who as Saudi Arabia's military attaché in Lebanon in 2014 and 2015 monitored Hezbollah, was fed information by some Lebanese politicians about the group's role in the Syrian civil war, according to a Lebanese man who frequently spoke with Sabhan during his time in Beirut. Sabhan would often chat with politicians, journalists and businessmen at a cafe in Beirut's upscale Verdun neighborhood, said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private conversations. “He is a tight-lipped person. He listens more than he talks,” the Lebanese man said.

After his stint in Lebanon, Sabhan was appointed Saudi Arabia's first ambassador to Iraq in more than 25 years. But just nine months into the job, Iraq's government demanded that Sabhan be replaced after he sparked an outcry for alleging the government refused to provide him better protection in the face of what he claimed were plans by Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups to assassinate him. He also called on Iraq's government to exclude Shiite paramilitary groups from the military campaign against the Islamic State group. Sabhan was recalled and appointed to his current ministerial post, where he has used Twitter to vocalize the kingdom's brash anti-Iran rhetoric. He's also been sent on missions far and wide. He was spotted last month in the Syrian city of Raqqa with a US official after the Islamic State group's de facto capital was recaptured by Syrian, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish-led forces.

In Saudi Arabia, Sabhan has sat in on high-level meetings and welcomed Lebanon's Maronite patriarch when he visited the conservative Sunni Muslim country in a first ever such trip. He was also present at the patriarch's meeting with King Salman. Sabhan has also sat in on the king's meeting with Turkey's foreign minister in June, the crown prince's meeting in August with prominent Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and meetings with Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

On Twitter, Sabhan has openly tried to call the shots in Lebanon, demanding that Hezbollah be kicked out of the government and calling on the Lebanese to confront the militant group. He even got into a Twitter spat with Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. In one of the Hezbollah leader's speeches, he described Sabhan as “*zaatout*,” a derogatory Arabic term that means variously “little monkey with lots of hair” or an “adult who behaves like a child.” Sabhan responded with a tweet of his own. “If an incompetent man criticizes

me, this is proof that I am a whole man,” he wrote. Former Lebanese Cabinet Minister Wiam Wahhab, a Hezbollah ally, described Sabhan in a television interview as a “monster on the loose.” “I hope that al-Sabhan paid the price for such militia-style behavior,” he said.

### **Palestinians Angry After Saudi Arabia Downplays Importance of Jerusalem**

Proponents of the Palestinian cause have tried to inflate the position of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in Islam, and thereby paint Israel’s sovereignty in this city as an affront to their religion. But, a couple years ago, renowned Egyptian scholar and novelist Youssef Ziedan acknowledged in a series of television interviews that Jerusalem holds no religious significance for Muslims.

Today, it is common to hear that Jerusalem is Islam’s third holiest city, being the location of the “Al Aqsa Mosque” referred to in the Koran. “However, the Al-Aqsa Mosque did not exist back then, and the city was not called Al-Quds. It was called [Jerusalem], and it had no mosques.”

He is far from being alone in that position. In fact, a growing number of Saudis on social media have taken to using a hash tag that translates as “Riyadh is more important than Jerusalem.”

It is a deliberate downplaying of the importance of Jerusalem from both religious and nationalist viewpoints, and it coincides with the oil-rich kingdom’s warming relations with Israel. Saudis have grown increasingly frustrated with what they see as the Palestinian intransigence and treachery.



**Egyptian Scholar and Novelist Youssef Ziedan**  
(photo via Memri.com [Middle East Media Research Institute], Source: Mayadeen TV (Lebanon).

Palestinian rejection of Saudi efforts to bring the Israeli-Arab conflict to an equitable end has incensed many in Riyadh, as has Palestinian support for Iran’s nuclear program and collaboration between Palestinian groups and Iran’s Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia views Iran as an existential threat. Alienating Saudi Arabia in this manner threatens to lose the Palestinians the support of the Arab world’s top powers. And yet, we see their hearts continue to harden. In a backlash to the aforementioned Saudi hash tag, Palestinians on social media have started using a hash tag that translates as “Jerusalem is more important than the [Saudi] king.” If things continue down this path, a day could come when the Arab world’s leading powers reject a Palestinian state even more than Israel does (*Israel Today* article).

It is refreshing to see this kind of support from the Arab world. Let us pray that there will be more of this in the future.

**“...Today the LORD has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the LORD your God, just as He has spoken” (Deuteronomy 26:18-19).**

In Messiah,

Lonnie C. Mings