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HEADLINE: Saudi Official, Jewish Leaders Meet;
Meeting seen sign of change toward Israel

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BODY:

In an unprecedented official encounter, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States met yesterday with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and the group's chairman said he told them Israel was a permanent fixture in the Middle East.

"It's a breakthrough. We started a dialogue," conference Chairman **Shoshana Cardin** told reporters after the two-hour meeting with Prince Bandar bin Sultan in his suite at the Waldorf Astoria yesterday morning.

Saudi Arabia traditionally has been one of the Arab countries most adamantly opposed to Israel's existence. But since the Persian Gulf war, American diplomats have been suggesting that Saudi Arabia had changed its attitude.

Cardin said Bandar had told the approximately 30 American Jewish leaders at the meeting that "Israel is part of the Middle East" and that any permanent diplomatic settlements in the region would have to include Israel.

Bandar had played a key role in urging Syrians to meet bilaterally with Israeli officials at the recent Mideast peace conference in Madrid. He reportedly told the American Jewish leaders he felt Syria would continue negotiating with Israel and that he was "optimistic" some agreement would emerge from their talks.

He told the leaders he has urged President George Bush to exercise patience with the talks, saying events evolved slowly in the Middle East, said sources at the meeting.

At the end of the meeting, Bandar presented a series of suggestions but participants differed as to how formally they were Saudi commitments for future action.

He told the leaders that if Israel froze expansion of settlements in territories it had occupied during wars with Arabs, Arab countries would seek an end of the Arab economic boycott of Israel and a repeal of the UN resolution that Zionism is racism, said participants.

Palestinian leaders, he said, would be inclined to slow down or end their intifada, or rebellion, against Israeli control of the territories.

Bandar made no public statement to the press.

With the exception of officials from Egypt, the only Arab country that recognizes Israel, yesterday's encounter was the first formal meeting between a ranking Arab official and American Jewish leaders, said participants.

The meeting was arranged at Bandar's request through the American Jewish Congress, whose director, Henry Seigman, has been meeting privately with Bandar for four years, sources said. Bandar also has met privately with other Jewish leaders such as Rabbi Alexander M. Shindler, head of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, an association of 856 reform synagogues.