



Saudi-Israeli Relations: Balancing Legitimacy and Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There is much speculation on a warming of relations, and even collaboration, between Saudi Arabia and Israel in the aftermath of the Iran nuclear deal. Both countries perceive a nuclear Iran to be a great threat. However, given its history and concern for the legitimacy of its rule, the Saudi royal family is more likely to draw closer to Iran than to Israel.

Following the signing of an agreement on Iran's nuclear development on November 24, the press speculated that Saudi Arabia and Israel – the most important US allies in the region and the countries most jilted by Washington – would increase their cooperation. But given its history and concern for the legitimacy of its rule, particularly after the Arab uprisings, the Saudi royal family is more likely to draw closer to Iran than to Israel.

Real and Rumored Saudi Contact With Israel

Since the 1980s, Saudi officialdom has demonstrated a relatively conciliatory stance towards Israel. Prince Fahd's initiative of 1981, the Fez plan of 1982, and King Abdullah's plan, which became the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002, all offered recognition to Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state and full withdrawal from all territories captured in 1967. Israeli leaders publicly demonstrated some interest, and the press reported secret meetings between Israeli and Saudi officials in 2006-2007 with an eye towards making the initiative more palatable to Israel. In 2008 Olmert offered to include Saudis in a committee of religious leaders administering Jerusalem's holy sites.

The *Sunday Times* has been the source of several stories of Saudi-Israeli defense cooperation – all citing anonymous Israeli officials – since the Iranian threat has grown. It reported that the Saudis agreed to let Israel attack Iran via its airspace and that they were practicing standing down their air defenses. This assertion dovetailed with remarks made to this author by an American academic who had met with a top Saudi defense official.

In May 2013, it reported that a defense agreement was in the works between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, including the sharing of radar station and missile defense information. In October, Israel's Channel Two reported that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was supervising "intensive meetings" with prominent Gulf officials, one of whom had even visited Israel. In November, the *Sunday Times* struck again, reporting Saudi Arabia would cooperate in the use of refueling planes, rescue helicopters, and drones. An Israeli minister told *Buzzfeed* that it was Saudi Arabia that informed Israel about the secret US-Iran nuclear talks that preceded the Geneva agreement. The Saudis denied such contacts.

The Israeli leadership has recently made several statements expressing the common interests between Israel and the Sunni countries of the region. These include Amos Gilad, Director of Political-Military Affairs in the Ministry of Defense, and several other spokespersons. The most overlooked pro-Saudi reference was a few lines in Netanyahu's speech at the UN in early October, when he expressed his hope that Israel would build relationships with Arab countries equally threatened by Iran.

While the leaks are probably from Israeli sources trying to threaten Iran, the Saudis are most likely of two minds about contacts with Israel. On the one hand, a large part of the ruling family's internal and regional legitimacy is based on being perceived as promoting Arab and Islamic causes. Palestine is just such a cause, and to be seen discussing anything with Israel is problematic. On the other hand, the Saudis have said that they have the right to do anything to assure their security, the implication being that talks with Israel should not be ruled out. Iran should therefore be put on notice.

The Saudis, the Gulf, and Bandwagoning

The Saudis have always been reluctant to confront Iran. Although separated by a history of political and religious enmity, Riyadh sought to get along with Tehran. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Riyadh has effectively opted against – or been deterred from – taking action against Iran, even when Tehran was organizing sedition amongst Saudi Arabia's own Shiites and making trouble at the pilgrimage. Not even Tehran's hand in the explosion at

Khobar Towers in Dhahran in 1996 spurred Riyadh into action. In fact, relations with Iran actually *improved* after the bombing. The Saudis were running scared, and are still scared. That's why the official Saudi response was more muted than some expected: "If there is good will, then this agreement could be an initial step toward reaching a comprehensive solution to Iran's nuclear program."

With the US going wobbly on Iran and seeming not to understand the threat, Riyadh seems to be secretly reaching out to Israel, trying to firm up the moribund Gulf Cooperation Council, and improve relations with Iran. The Saudis are doing a bit of "bandwagoning," which is the idea that rather than balance against threats, states join them. In the face of Iran's diplomatic coup, Saudi Arabia is trying to lower the flames with Iran and test the waters of a future rapprochement. While not actually joining Iran, it is trying to hedge its bets by just getting along.

Saudi Arabia has not gone to the lengths of the UAE, where the bandwagoning response is stronger. The UAE was the first Gulf country to express support for the agreement, and UAE Foreign Minister Abdallah bin Zayd was the first to visit Iran. The UAE's quick response seems to have been rewarded: in the second week of December, Iran removed jet fighters from Abu Musa, one of three islands in dispute between the countries. It was later confirmed that they were holding talks to solve the dispute.

The Saudi-led GCC is shaky, and the kingdom has been further weakened regionally. When the Saudis proposed on December 7 that the GCC form a political union, Oman objected publicly. A few days later the GCC announced the formation of a unified military command and police force, but no political union. The two former, like the latter, were unlikely to come into being.

Defending the Kingdom

Defending Saudi Arabia has always been outsourced, first to Britain and then to America. Disappointed with the US for its abandonment of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and support of the Muslim Brotherhood, its fecklessness in Syria, and succumbing to the charm offensive of Iran, some Saudi officials and royals, led by the volatile former head of intelligence, Prince Turki Al Faysal, have been vocal about seeking new defense arrangements. But in the end they can only look to Washington. The US knows this and has moved to reassure the Saudis. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has proposed new initiatives aimed at bolstering US-led defense cooperation in the region.

Conclusion

The implications of the confluence of interests between Riyadh and Jerusalem should not be overstated. Saudi Arabia is not about to give up its position in the Islamic world by forming an alliance with Israel, the perceived enemy of Islam. Yet quiet cooperation should not be ruled out. In the event of an Israeli attack on Iran, Saudi Arabia could stand down its radar. It could offer refueling and search and rescue backup for Israeli pilots. Above all, it could step up intelligence sharing with Jerusalem. In the future, the US could mediate possible cooperation in missile defense between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries of the GCC. Theoretically, there is no reason that an anti-ballistic missile battery based in Saudi Arabia or Qatar could not intercept a missile launched at Israel from Iran. But such cooperation is extremely risky for the regime and would require a greater degree of trust in Israel than Riyadh probably has.

When it comes to Israel, the Saudis will continue to balance their national security considerations with their internal and regional legitimacy concerns. The political cost of improving relations with Israel is much higher than improving relations with Iran. Even though the Saudi Wahhabis have no love for Iranian Shiites, the latter are at least Muslims. A bit of bandwagoning with Iran will therefore most likely be the order of the day. In any case, the Kingdom knows that the US, for its own reasons, will have its back.

As for the Israelis, the public diplomacy and psychological operations value of leaking meetings with the Saudis is limited and counter-productive. Israeli leaders would be well advised to keep these arrangements under the tightest of wraps, lest the Saudis ditch them entirely.

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