

A way forward with Saudi Arabia

Beyond parallel struggles to counter Iran-backed radical Islamic groups that threaten each, Israel and Saudi Arabia also share similar strategic dilemmas and operational threats.

By Sander Gerber, Ari Heistein, Yoel Guzansky / Dec. 9, 2019

Saudi Arabia and Israel are unlikely partners with seemingly little in common. For starters, there is no formal recognition between the two countries. Digging a bit deeper, one can see a stark contrast between Israel, which is a resource-poor democracy that depends primarily on its human capital to power economic growth, and the Kingdom, which is a resource-rich monarchy facing population growth that weighs heavily on its economy. Yet their major national security challenges have considerable overlap.

It is often said to be the world's worst-kept secret that Israel and Saudi Arabia cooperate covertly against a common enemy, the Iranian regime. Their enmity toward Iran does not originate from territorial disputes or geopolitical interests, but from the simple fact that Iran has called for the destruction of both countries, and has taken steps to try and operationalize those declarations. Iran targets Israel and Saudi Arabia because they are key allies of the "great Satan" – America – metaphorically acting as Washington's stationary aircraft carriers in the Middle East, and because Iran espouses a radical form of Shia Islam which considers both nations to be "usurpers."

Threatening Israeli and Saudi security is not incidental, rather, it is a key component of the Iranian project for dismantling US security architecture and diminishing American influence in the Middle East. Iran seeks to hold these allies as "hostages" by borrowing from North Korea's playbook and threatening to decimate American allies in order to constrain the White House so that Iran can act with impunity. In light of Iran's slow creep toward the nuclear threshold, this strategy is now exceptionally dangerous.

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