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Israel and Saudi Arabia: Is the Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?

Udi Dekel and Yoel Guzansky

Recent reports and commentaries have suggested that a rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia is underway. Indeed, both countries are eager to prevent Iran from achieving military nuclear capability and would like to curb Iranian attempts to attain regional hegemony. In addition, both are perturbed by recent developments in US policy, particularly the reluctance to use force against Iran and Syria, and signs of a gradual shift away from the problems of the Middle East. However, in spite of the convergence of interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia, full normalization is not on the agenda as long as there is no significant political breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians. At the same time, there is a wide range between full diplomatic relations and a total lack of contact, and the two countries can take advantage of this.

With the publication of the Fahd initiative in 1982, Saudi Arabia abandoned, at least officially, the policy that had until then rejected Israel's right to exist. Following the Madrid conference in 1991, a certain rapprochement took place between the two countries, and they participated in five working groups to deal with regional issues – water, the environment, economics, refugees, and arms control. The Abdullah initiative of 2002, the basis for the Arab Peace Initiative, went a step further, promising Israel “normal relations” with the Arab and Muslim world if it met a number of conditions. Israel initially rejected the initiative as a basis for dialogue with the Arab world, though subsequently a number of senior Israeli officials, including President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, expressed support for the positive aspects of the initiative while mindful of the problematic issues (e.g., normal relations were made contingent on completion of the peace process, a withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines, and a solution of the refugee problem on the basis of UN General Assembly resolution 194).

Apart from the Abdullah initiative, Saudi Arabia has remained on the sidelines of attempts to promote the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians (and Syria as well). Perhaps, then, the initiative was intended to counter the kingdom's negative image following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Oman and Qatar, which are generally outside the consensus in the Gulf Cooperation Council, had formal – albeit partial –

relations with Israel. Israel had diplomatic missions in both countries that were ultimately closed in the wake of the second intifada and Operation Cast Lead.

On several occasions, the Saudis have announced that they have no intention of making another move that could be interpreted as a gesture toward Israel, and the kingdom has even pressured the small monarchies to follow suit. Similarly, in recent years the Gulf states have refused to comply with the US request to take confidence building measures toward Israel in order to create a supportive regional atmosphere for the Israeli-Palestinian political process. At the same time, however, WikiLeaks documents indicate an “ongoing and secret dialogue” on the Iranian issue. Likewise, it was reported that Israeli companies have assisted Gulf states through security consulting, training of local military forces, and sales of weapons and advanced systems and technologies. In addition, senior officials from both sides have held ongoing meetings in and outside the region. The reports also indicate that Israel has softened its policy on weapons exports to the Gulf states as well as its attempts to restrict sales of advanced weapons by the United States to the Gulf states, in part as a signal that it sees a potential for partnership more than a possible threat. In addition, Israel is enjoying a certain amount of access to markets in the Gulf, as long as the products do not have Israeli labels.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states recognize Israel’s military power as well as its close ties with the United States (and its influence in Congress), and they see the value in maintaining some level of coordination with it. However, normal relations – the Saudis’ preferred phrase – are not possible, they claim, as long as there is no significant breakthrough in the political process with the Palestinians. Yet if and when Israel and the Palestinians reach a full or partial political agreement, it is far from clear that this will necessarily lead to a “political spring” between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has made demands by the West for reform, openness in relations with Israel, and a contribution to regional stability contingent, first of all, on a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, the peaceful but cold relations with Egypt and Jordan and the upheavals in the Arab world have to some extent harmed the wherewithal of any Israeli government to present “normalization” to the Israeli public as proper compensation for “painful” concessions in the political process.

To Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, the cost of open relations with Israel at this time may be higher than the benefit, given the position of the Arab street, which rejects recognition of Israel and relations with it. The Arab monarchies in the Gulf are currently benefiting from the fact that covert, unofficial relations allow them to enjoy the advantages of ties with Israel without having to pay a price in public opinion, which has become more vocal since the outbreak of the Arab spring. In addition, common interests are not common values. To a certain extent, covert relations are also more comfortable

for Israel: Israel as such need not confront the moral aspects of ties with absolutist monarchies, and can even present Saudi hostility as another barrier to the confidence building that is essential to promoting the peace process and producing the fruits of peace.

Some have argued recently that Saudi Arabia and Israel's shared disappointment with President Obama's policy toward Iran and Syria constitutes a convergence of interests for formulating some kind of partnership between the two countries. However, Israel would do well to distance itself as much as possible from initiatives to form a common front with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and others against the Obama administration. The perception that there is a united front against the United States could harm relations with Israel's primary ally, which in any case are in a sensitive period. Moreover, a growing threat from Iran will not necessarily make it easier for Saudi Arabia and Israel to cooperate. Shared interests do not denote an identical view of the strategic environment. Thus, for example, the agreement with Iran and the fear of the Islamic Republic could lead Saudi Arabia, for lack of any other option, to hedge closer to Iran in a measured fashion, and later, to be more vocal about the Israeli nuclear issue, since "if Iran, then why not Israel?" In addition, Saudi Arabia may hope for an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructures, but it harbors reservations about any appearance of operational cooperation with Israel, lest it be required to pay the price for an Israeli attack. And on a more basic level, there is a psychological and religious barrier that complicates confidence building between Saudi Arabia and Israel and the establishment of a stable infrastructure for relations, with limited potential gains.

While Saudi Arabia thus sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a factor undermining stability, it perceives Iran as its main security and ideological problem. Furthermore, the basis for understandings between Israel and Saudi Arabia has expanded following the interim nuclear agreement signed by the major powers and Iran, which was not viewed positively in Israel or Saudi Arabia, and the agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons, which gave legitimacy and precious time to the Bashar Assad regime. In addition, there are shared interests in the need to curb Iranian influence, the illegitimacy of the Assad regime, the support for military council in Egypt, and the basic approach that relies on the United States. These common interests, together with the shared fear of the consequences of the Geneva agreement with Iran and an Iranian-American rapprochement, do not have the power to lead to open cooperation and normal relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but can strengthen the covert coordination and the understandings between them.

Moreover, even this form of relationship is important, especially since these are ties between states that do not officially recognize each other. Dialogue helps maintain regional stability, and will certainly not hurt in promoting a political settlement. Yet it is highly doubtful that Saudi Arabia, which purports to lead the Gulf states, will grant Israel

the elements of normalization straight away, and any attempt to change the relations from covert to overt could damage them. True progress in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians may expand the basis of common interests and allow Israel to demand greater support from Saudi Arabia to promote political initiatives and assist in building the Palestinian state, even if a comprehensive permanent status agreement is not achieved.

