

Common Threats Offer New Opportunities for Israel-GCC Cooperation

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The Trump administration should treat the Gulf's quiet security coordination with Israel as a chance to counter Iranian and jihadist threats in the region, perhaps even parlaying it into progress on the Palestinian issue.

Today, Israel and many of the Gulf Arab states see a common strategic threat emanating from Iran. The reality of facing common threats is not new. Alexander Haig, when he was serving as secretary of state in the Reagan administration, declared in 1981 that there was a "[strategic consensus](http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/20/world/haig-says-us-seeks-consensus-strategy-in-the-middle-east.html?pagewanted=all)

[\(<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/20/world/haig-says-us-seeks-consensus-strategy-in-the-middle-east.html?pagewanted=all>\)](http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/20/world/haig-says-us-seeks-consensus-strategy-in-the-middle-east.html?pagewanted=all) " in the Middle East between Arab states and Israel because they were similarly

threatened by the Soviet Union and Iran after the Islamic Revolution in Tehran. Haig may have been right theoretically, but common threats did not then produce practical cooperation between Israel and the Arab states.

But something is different now. In Saudi Arabia in August 2016, leading Saudi officials told me "Israel is not an enemy." They were instead preoccupied with Iran and its use of Shia militias to weaken Arab states and gain hegemony in the region. To be sure, the Saudi officials did not acknowledge cooperation with the Israelis, saying instead that they could anticipate far-reaching collaboration with Israel once the Palestinian conflict was resolved.

Nonetheless, rumors abound that Israel is cooperating in security, intelligence, and even operational ways with leading Arab states, including those in the Arabian Peninsula. The old saying "Where there is smoke there is fire" probably applies here -- and it should not be surprising. The Iranian threat, which employs the heavy use of Shia and other militias, is very real. The effort to destabilize and build Iranian leverage throughout the region is not fanciful. What the Saudis and Gulf Cooperation Council states see in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, the Israelis also see. The Saudis and Emiratis, and their Arab allies, see the Iranian threat in existential terms. The Israelis see the Iranian nuclear threat in similar terms, and while Iranian support for Hizballah and Hamas may not rise to that

level of danger, Iran has done much to help them threaten Israel's homeland with tens of thousands of rockets and missiles.

So there is, in all likelihood, security cooperation going on below the radar screen. No one calls attention to it, but that does not make it any less real. Ironically, there was one other shared perception that did much to contribute to fostering at least low visibility cooperation between Israel and the leading Sunni states: the shared perception of the Obama administration. Fairly or not, Israelis and Arabs alike perceived former President Barack Obama as withdrawing from U.S. responsibilities in the Middle East. They believed that the United States was retrenching and pivoting to Asia, and was simply going to be less involved in the region. To make matters worse, they perceived that Obama saw Iran as part of the solution to, not the source of, the problems in the Middle East. For the leading Arab states, that required them not only to do more for their own security but also to look to those who could help and were indeed ready to do so.

From this standpoint, Israel was a natural partner. It was not just that Israel shared the same threat perception. It was that Israel had real capabilities -- militarily, technologically, intelligence-wise, and in countering terror -- and was prepared to use them. After Israel struck a convoy on January 18, 2015 traveling near the Golan Heights, killing an Iranian Quds Force general, Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, and a Hizballah operative, Jihad Mughniyeh (the son of Imad Mughniyeh), the Twitter-sphere in Saudi Arabia lit up applauding what the Israelis had done. Noted Saudi commentator Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, writing after this incident and about the response in Saudi social media, speculated on why so much **[enthusiasm \(http://english.aawsat.com/abdul-rahman-al-rashed/opinion/opinion-how-did-we-end-up-cheering-for-israel\)](http://english.aawsat.com/abdul-rahman-al-rashed/opinion/opinion-how-did-we-end-up-cheering-for-israel)** had been generated. His answer: because Iran is an enemy and Saudis and others understand that it is in their interest to see the Iranians suffer setbacks and have a price inflicted on them. That the Israelis did this made it no less important to these Saudis. Rashed would still say that, as important as the Israeli actions had been, Israel could not be seen as a friend until the Palestinian issue was resolved. But the reaction in Saudi social media was unmistakable.

One does not have to be portrayed as a friend to collaborate against common enemies. There are signs that the administration of U.S. President Donald J. Trump would want to take advantage of cooperation between Israel and Arab states to help in countering the Iranians, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and al-Qaeda. While the United States has conducted multinational military exercises that have included Israelis and Emirates along with other national participants, formal approaches or undertakings binding the Israelis and Gulf Arab states are far less likely than informal ones. That said, much can be done informally and without fanfare. For example, discreet contingency planning could be done to develop options for countering Iran's use of Shia militias and for raising the costs to the Iranians of using them. Already there are signs that morale in Hizballah has been eroded by the high cost its fighters have paid in Syria, and the cavalier way Iran's Quds Force leader, Major General Qassim Suleimani, has treated them **[as if they are cannon fodder \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-losing-its-luster-under-soleimani\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-losing-its-luster-under-soleimani)**. Apart from developing options for countering the use of the Shia militias, discreet three-way discussions with the United States, Israel, and Arab states could be useful for doing more to integrate missile defenses, explore lessons learned, consider best practices, and adopt the most effective forms of training.

In other words, should the United States cultivate such quiet cooperation between the Israeli and Arab security and intelligence forces, it could yield additional payoffs in contending with the threats posed by the Iranians, ISIL, and al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups. Of course, the convergence of Israeli-Sunni interests could also be potentially useful on the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Presently, both the Palestinians and Israelis need an Arab cover to make any positive moves toward each other. The Palestinians are too divided (between the West Bank and Gaza), too weak, and **[their leaders too alienated \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-abbas-trump-](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-abbas-trump-)**

agenda-urging-modest-steps-toward-peace) from their own public to look at negotiations with Israel as anything but a concession. To actually make any compromise in negotiations is simply unthinkable at this point without the Arabs providing a cover or at least sharing the responsibility for any step the Palestinians make toward the Israelis. But the Israelis, too, need a cover. The Israeli body politic is so disbelieving of the Palestinians that they are convinced that any concession made to the Palestinians will simply be pocketed. In the eyes of the Israeli public, Israel will never receive anything from the Palestinians, so why be, in Hebrew, a "friar," or sucker? Why make any concessions toward the Palestinians? For the Israelis presently, any concession toward the Palestinians can only be justified if it is producing something tangible from the Arab states -- in terms of normal relations or overt cooperation on security.

The real question is whether the leading Arab states at this point have an interest in providing cover to both Palestinians and Israelis alike. Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah II convey such an interest. The Gulf Arab states seem otherwise preoccupied with the threats from Iran and, in the case of the Saudis, the demands of their National Transformation Program. Still, given the overall convergence of strategic interests, why not see if it is possible to break the stalemate between the Israelis and Palestinians? That certainly seems to be the thinking behind a concept described as "outside-in" for launching a new effort on peace. Outside-in means, rather than working through the Palestinians to create ties for Israel with the Arabs, using the approach of working with the Arab states to tackle the Palestinian conflict. As noted, there is a need for Arab cover for both Palestinians and Israelis, and that argues for the kind of Arab role that has been lacking historically in peacemaking between the Israeli and Palestinian national movements.

Trump, in his press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, spoke of a "bigger deal" in response to Netanyahu's reference to the Arab states and the potential for promoting peace. While the logic for an Arab or regional role now is strong, there should be no illusions. This is not a way to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the cheap. If Arab states are prepared to assume a new role and responsibility in the conflict, they will want to show that they are delivering for the Palestinians what they cannot deliver for themselves. They will not forsake Palestinian national aspirations but seek to fulfill them. And, they won't accept an outcome that does not provide for a Palestinian state.

In the end, Israel and the leading Sunni Arab states share common threat perceptions, and their tacit cooperation creates an important new development in the region. Can the Trump administration take advantage of it to counter the Iranian and Sunni radical Islamist threats in the region, and parlay it into progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Time, and effective quiet diplomacy, will tell.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Arab Gulf States Institute website (<http://www.agsiw.org/common-threats-offer-new-opportunities-israel-gcc-cooperation/>). ❖

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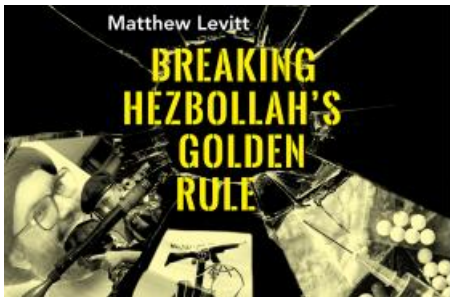
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