

# Israel-GCC Ties Twenty-Five Years After the First Gulf War

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**Although broader public relations between Israel and the Gulf states have yet to take off, many of their economic, intelligence, and diplomatic ties are already at cruising altitude.**

**H**ow does one write 2,000 words about links between Israel and the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which no official of any of the seven countries is publicly prepared to admit exist? The answer is "with difficulty." And how does one rank those links in terms of significance without breaking confidences? The way forward is to rely on already published accounts, but including some judgment on their significance.

## PRIVATE TIES

**T**he short answer is that links are extensive, even, in some cases, very good. But they are mostly out of the public gaze. So although shared anxiety about Iran's nuclear program and Tehran's mischievous intent has been a bonding factor, Jerusalem must have been disappointed by the response of the GCC -- Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman -- to this summer's diplomacy. When the deal was announced in Vienna on July 14, only Israel opposed it. The six Arab countries, although some expressed apparent concern about the details, voiced support for the Obama administration's solution. They might have been in the same book as Israel but they pointedly did not want to be, at least publicly, on the same page. It was yet another reminder to Jerusalem of the limitations of any links.

The links are both diplomatic and economic. The political contacts almost certainly go up and down -- it's hard to imagine that the Mossad assassination of Hamas gun-runner Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai in 2010 was just a minor hiccup. But the business and trade links are growing steadily and, at least in the case of some countries (and I don't mean Egypt and Jordan, with which Israel has official relations), are significant -- one statistic I heard this year

from a Gulf official was breathtaking.

I have a personal anecdote about an incident which made me appreciate that the stories of the ubiquity of Israeli trade with the Arab world were based on fact rather than conspiratorial rumor. In early 2004, a year after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and before such a journey would have been considered totally irresponsible, I did a road trip down the length of the country with some colleagues from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. We met up in Turkey and crossed into northern Iraq. Spending nights in Irbil, Sulaimaniyah, and Baghdad before heading south toward Basra, we eventually reached Kuwait. Going south, we stopped a night in Nasiriyah, a town on the Euphrates River, where we stayed in the only, and therefore the best, hotel, just 100 yards from the local headquarters of the pro-Iranian Badr Shiite militia. Over dinner, we asked the waiter if he had any beer. Feigning shock at the request (southern Iraq is religiously conservative), he offered to find some for us but we would have to drink it in our rooms. A price was negotiated and an hour later the beer discreetly arrived. To our surprise, the cans were of the Israeli Goldstar beer but, unlike the cans in Israel, without any hint printed on the side of the cans of where the beer was brewed. Our shock was not only that we were able to drink Goldstar, but that the local beer of choice was, we judged, also an easily recognizable Israeli brand.

## WASHINGTON DIPLOMACY

This last summer has provided a comparatively bountiful harvest of further instances of Israel's relations with the wider Arab world, including the Gulf. A revealing paragraph in *Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide* by former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren, reads as follows: "One of the peculiar privileges of Israel's ambassador in Washington is the ability to meet with Arab personages and diplomats off the record and, for the most part, far from public view. With the notable exception of the Saudi ambassador, virtually all of my Arab counterparts were willing to speak. These were exceptional people, appointed solely for their ability to excel in American circles." The index of *Ally* does not point to Oren's indiscretion -- you have to read the book to discover it (it's on page 301). Nevertheless, Oren's candidness enables me to tell (a truncated form of) a second anecdote. A Gulf ambassador once half-complained to me over a working breakfast in a downtown DC hotel that Oren kept sending invitations for the Israel national day celebrations!

In early September, the *Huffington Post* came out with a long profile of the UAE ambassador in Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, entitled "His Town." Noting the overlap between his country's skeptical view of Iran and the positions taken by Israel and AIPAC, the authors wrote: "[A] U.S. senior official added that Otaiba and Israeli ambassador Ron Dermer are very close. 'They agree on just about everything,' he says. (Excluding the Palestinians, he clarified.)" The article continues: "A high-level official with the Israeli embassy confirms the value of this strategic alliance. 'Israel and the Arabs standing together is the ultimate ace in the hole. Because it takes it out of the politics and the ideology. When Israel and the Arab states are standing together, it's powerful,' he says."

According to the *Huffington Post*: "This year, Dermer invited Otaiba to attend Netanyahu's speech on Iran to Congress, but Otaiba declined due to political sensitivities back home. Through a spokesman, Otaiba denied that he and Dermer are personal friends. And there are limitations to the relationship on the Israeli side, too. When Netanyahu met Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in July to discuss the Iran issue, he grumbled about how the U.S. had cornered itself into selling sophisticated weapons systems to Gulf Arabs, according to Israeli reports confirmed by a senior U.S. official. The skepticism goes both ways. 'This Gulf-Israel detente is not real,' says the official. 'If they are such close friends, maybe they could start by recognizing Israel.'"

## ISRAEL-SAUDI LINKS

The other major event of the summer was the "outing" of Saudi-Israeli contacts at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington in early June. Dore Gold, a Netanyahu confidant on the point of becoming the director-general of

Israel's Foreign Ministry, shared a platform with retired Saudi MG Anwar Eshki. Both revealed a series of meetings in which they had exchanged views on the Middle East. Explaining the context of the revelation was left to the reporters of it. In the circumstances, it seemed to be a message to the Obama administration that Israel and Saudi Arabia had overlapping interests on the Iran issue and Washington should realize this. Although Dore Gold is clearly a more significant personality in Israel than Eshki is in the kingdom, the latter could not have spoken in public without the knowledge of the House of Saud. An additional factor of significance is that the contacts started during the reign of King Abdullah (who died in January) and have continued under the new King Salman, implying renewed approval. Eshki, whom I met at the CFR event, is a charming individual who tells me there have been no repercussions at home against him for his activities.

But the links, certainly with Saudi Arabia, go back in time, preceding even the establishment of the GCC in 1981. I once wrote that a Saudi-Israeli back-channel had been established in the 1980s when King Fahd had saddled the then head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal, with the task. (My source was a friend of Turki's who had apparently indicated his distaste for the role.) But an Israeli contact corrected me. The back-channel had already existed in the tenure of Sheikh Kamal Adham, when he was in charge of the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate from 1965 to 1979, before Turki's tenure. Some diplomatic contacts have been instigated by the U.S., apparently with the logic that if Washington is friendly with both parties, you should occasionally at least talk to each other. An Israeli official once told me how he had visited a Gulf capital for meetings in which each side gave their points of view on a variety of subjects. There wasn't always much agreement but it was an exchange of perspectives -- and the country concerned allowed the visitors to use Israeli passports on entering and leaving the country.

## **SELF-INTEREST AS MOTIVATION**

**T**he driving force, though, appears to be overlapping self-interest. The most obvious growth period in Israeli contacts, taking it from the intelligence to diplomatic level, dates back to the 1990s and the Oslo Accords, which enabled at least some of the Gulf States to circumvent their previous reluctance because of the absence of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. In 1994, then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin went to Oman and met Sultan Qaboos, the ruler. A year later, after Rabin was assassinated, Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi came to Jerusalem to see then-acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres. In 1996, the two countries signed an agreement to each open trade representative offices. The same year, Qatar and Israel agreed to do the same.

Peres visited both capitals, and the trade offices, with three diplomats in each, were established. But Oman shut the Israeli office in 2000 while the one in Qatar lasted until 2009. Neither Muscat nor Doha fulfilled the agreement by establishing offices in Israel. Perhaps perversely, Israel's continuing quiet relations with Oman are thought to be better than its links with Qatar. Israeli scientists also continue to cooperate with Oman on desalination techniques. Doha originally started flirting with Israel as a way of improving its ties with Washington, by soliciting congressional support. These days, though, the Qatari royals seem to think the wave to ride is support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a view inimical to Jerusalem.

The assassination of Mabhouh aside, Israel's closest relations in the Gulf would seem to be with the United Arab Emirates. Although there have been problems with Israelis competing in sports events, in 2013 the UAE hosted a renewable energy conference at which Israel was represented. And, despite Michael Oren's words, the Gulf state with the most overt apparent hostility to Israel is Kuwait, which boycotted the same conference in Abu Dhabi because of Israel's presence. Kuwait's view, I am told, is different for clandestine contacts. Somewhere in the GCC (I know but won't say) there is an Israeli diplomatic mission, the existence of which was revealed in a carelessly edited version of the 2013 state budget, which noted that between 2010 and 2012, 11 new representative offices had opened across the world, including one in the Gulf. The link to the offending page of the document, published in the *Times* of Israel, now produces an error message in English and Hebrew from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

An indication of the stop-go nature of Israeli-Gulf relations is the fate of the Twitter page established in 2013, @IsraelintheGCC. It still exists, but there have been no new tweets since December 2014. It has a mere 2,080 followers but only 17 have favorited it. But by itself, it only indicates that, publicly, broader Israeli-Gulf relations have yet to take off. In reality, despite some turbulence, the ties are already at cruising altitude.

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