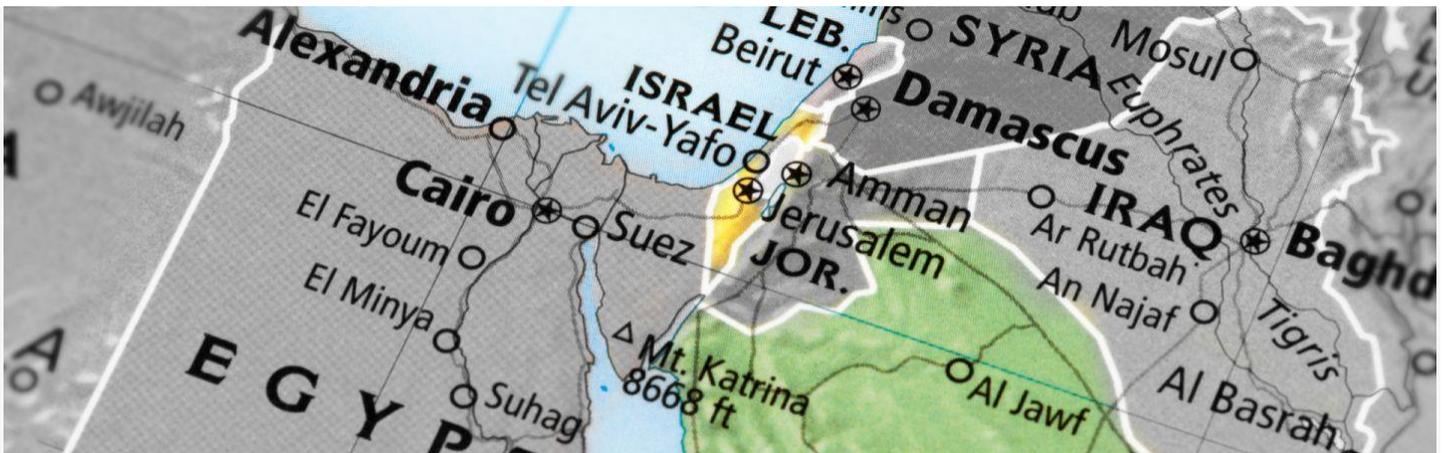


ASSESSMENTS

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In the Middle East, Strange Times Make for Strange Bedfellows



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Highlights

- *The Iranian threat is pulling the once-clandestine relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia into the public eye.*
- *But there are other factors encouraging the two countries to work more closely with each other, including their legitimacy at home and abroad.*
- *As Israel and Saudi Arabia move into uncharted territory, both risk exposing themselves to pushback and new dangers.*

There was a time when Saudi Arabia considered its enmity for Israel to be a mainstay of its power. But the shifting tides of geopolitics are steadily undercutting the value of conflict between the two. Perhaps nowhere is this change clearer than in an appearance last week by Israeli defense chief Gadi Eisenkot on a Saudi-owned TV station. During the Nov. 16 interview, Eisenkot declared Israel's readiness to share intelligence with Saudi Arabia on Iran. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz later reinforced his colleague's comment, confirming that Israel's ties with the kingdom were getting stronger.

Despite their natural hostility, the two countries have a long history of working together behind the scenes. In fact, their quiet cooperation is one of the worst-kept secrets in the Middle East. Nearly 70 years after the Jewish state was founded, however, the Gulf kingdom's new strategic needs — and a diminished appetite for continued acrimony among its people — seem to be bringing the uneasy neighbors' once-shadowy relationship into the international spotlight.

Out of the Shadows

From 1948 until the early 2000s, conflict defined Saudi Arabia's interactions with Israel. Yet as much as the kingdom protested Israel's grip on the Palestinian territories and, more broadly, the concept of Zionism, it showed little inclination to join its Arab neighbors in waging war against Israel for much of the 20th century. Saudi Arabia proved similarly reluctant to risk its relationship with the United States by fanning the flames of Palestinian *intifadas*, or uprisings, against Israeli governance, despite its rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause.

After Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was ousted in 2003, Saudi Arabia's attention — and anxiety — increasingly fixated on Iran. So, too, did Israel's. Though both countries relied heavily on the United States to guarantee their security, a war-weary Washington began to favor diplomatic engagement with Tehran as the decade wore on, pivoting its gaze toward Asia instead. As a result, Saudi Arabia and Israel began to seek new partners for countering their shared threat.

The veiled connection between Saudi Arabia and Israel has increased in lockstep with the perceived threat from Iran.

A few years ago, the kingdom's strategy shifted somewhat. The death of Saudi King Abdullah in January 2015 marked the end of an era of caution in the country's foreign policy. Though his half brother and successor, King Salman, ostensibly shared his mindset and generational outlook, his ambitious nephew did not. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman saw strategic deficiencies in the kingdom's approach to the region and designed a radical plan to address them. He moved quickly, shunting aside his political opponents and securing his current position in line of succession. His ascent represented the rise of a new generation with no living memory of the Palestinian exodus of 1948 or the Arab-Israeli war of 1967.

In June 2015, retired Saudi Gen. Anwar Eshki and Israeli Ambassador Dore Gold met to discuss the mutual threat of Iran. Nearly two years later, a hitherto unknown young Saudi named Abdulhameed Hakeem wrote an open letter to bin Salman calling for the Saudi, Israeli and Jewish peoples to form a united front against Iranian aggression. And in June, Israel's Channel 2 interviewed Hakeem from Jeddah — the first time a Saudi

citizen had ever been interviewed live on a Hebrew-language television channel. Each of these developments gradually shed more light on the veiled connection between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Perks of a Partnership

Fear of Iran has certainly pulled the longtime adversaries closer together over the past few years, but it doesn't explain Israeli officials' recent decision to go public with their cooperation. The two countries have historically kept their efforts to counter Iran under wraps. Moreover, in the near term Saudi Arabia and Israel will not commit to joint military action or establish bases in each other's territory — actions that would require a visible rapprochement. Instead the perks of publicity have more to do with domestic audiences, regional legitimacy and international influence.

For Saudi Arabia, an overt relationship with Israel serves as a bellwether of the population's willingness to change. Such flexibility will be necessary as the crown prince embarks on a sweeping reform program and attempts to change the perception of the kingdom in the halls of the U.S. Congress and in the headlines of American newspapers. Notably, none of the recent revelations of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel generated much backlash from either country's populace. The relatively calm response was particularly revealing to bin Salman, who hopes to gauge the attitudes and opinions of the kingdom's large generation of youths. By doing so, he can tease out whether the country's Wahhabi clerical establishment has the popular support needed to resist him and identify potential troublemakers who speak out against his policies. At the same time, the crown prince can refine and test his security services, who will be tasked with finding any dissidents.

A public relationship with a formidable military power like Israel would also help supplement Saudi Arabia's green forces on the battlefield in Yemen, giving Iran pause as it considers its next move there. Defense cooperation could begin with intelligence sharing on Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, a longtime enemy of Israel that Saudi Arabia has accused of training Houthi militants in Yemen. Collaboration may even extend to joint training, maneuvers and interdictions of supplies from Iran to its regional allies that transit the Red Sea. As an added perk, the crown prince can broadcast to the United States — still a key Saudi ally — that he is not an anti-Semite, buying himself some diplomatic cover from the growing international criticism of his war in Yemen. Weapons and advanced equipment that the United States currently denies the kingdom, such as the F-35 fighter jet, could even be made available if it becomes clear that Riyadh does not intend to use them against Israel.

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For its part, Israel stands to gain from an open detente with Saudi Arabia as well. The country's 1979 peace deal with Egypt secured its southwestern border; its 1993 treaty with Jordan did the same along its eastern edge. With each new Arab partner that Israel makes, it gains legitimacy and acceptance among its neighbors. And the recognition of Saudi Arabia — the home of the Muslim world's two holiest sites — would carry particular weight among those in the region who still hope to drive the Jewish state into the sea.

Acknowledged ties with Saudi Arabia would also bring several tangible benefits for Israel. The tiny country could count on further assistance in blocking Iranian arms shipments to Hamas and Hezbollah fighters on its southern and northern borders, respectively. Furthermore, deeper trade relationships with the kingdom could open up a massive market to Israeli goods and services. As the Saudi economy modernizes, Israel's high-tech industry may also gain access to an eager consumer base with plenty of cash to spend.

The Dangers of Detente

Even so, their budding relationship carries great risks — to bin Salman most of all. The Saudi government's legitimacy is partially built on a religious bedrock that mandates the restoration of Muslim rule over Jerusalem. It's possible that a relationship with Israel would widen the rifts already dividing the Arab and Muslim worlds, subjecting Saudi Arabia to accusations of hypocrisy and apostasy and perhaps bolstering the causes of terrorists who have targeted both states. Only a few decades ago, the arrival of U.S. troops in the kingdom during the Gulf War so enraged some Saudis that one — Osama bin Laden — dedicated his life to trying to pull the two countries into an apocalyptic war.

Clearly, a lack of public backlash is not the same as acquiescence. The unseen rumblings of dissatisfaction among Saudi citizens could coalesce into a more meaningful and dangerous movement, should the crown prince misjudge his subjects. Meanwhile rivals within the royal family — stilled for the moment, in the wake of bin Salman's recent consolidation of power and a purge of his opponents — could leverage the young leader's overtures to Israel to thwart his plans for the kingdom.

A newfound friendship with Saudi Arabia wouldn't sit well with some in Israel, either. The country's assertive right-wing factions, in pursuit of nationalist and religious agendas, are determined to annex the Palestinian territories. They may yet sabotage Israel's relationship with the kingdom, possibly by pushing through inopportune expansions of Jewish settlements in the West Bank that often anger the Muslim world. Access to religious sites might become a political sticking point between Israel's ultra-

Orthodox parties and Saudi Salafists as well. Unwieldy coalitions already make for unsteady Israeli governments; arguments over religion would only further undermine their stability.

To make matters more complicated, Israel could eventually be exposed to the risks that the Saudi crown prince faces as a result of their ties, should it feel compelled to protect its hard-won ally. Rather than becoming a strategic asset, Saudi Arabia may instead prove a liability if blowback to bin Salman threatens his seat on the throne. When hundreds of gunmen rose up against the House of Saud in 1979, French commandos helped the ruling family reclaim the Great Mosque they had overrun. But it is unclear whether Israel would be so willing to step in, should history someday repeat itself.

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