

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS IN WEST ASIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

Increasing intimacy between Saudi Arabia, the so-called bastion of Islamic orthodoxy, and Israel, the Jewish state carved out by the colonial powers in Arab Palestine, appears astonishing at first sight. The growing relationship, even if surreptitious, between the two states can be explained in large part with reference to the old adage, “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”.

The enemy is Iran, which both countries perceive as the primary threat to their strategic interests in West Asia. Saudi Arabia is engaged in a fierce competition with Iran for influence in the Persian Gulf and wider West Asia. Riyadh seems to be losing this competition as demonstrated by recent events in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as well as tiny Qatar’s defiant attitude.

The reasons for Israel’s overtures towards Saudi Arabia are more complex. A common front against Iran is, of course, a major factor determining Israeli policy. Iran is a potential challenger to Israel’s nuclear monopoly in West Asia and uses its influence in the Levant to impede Israeli dominance of the region. But equally important, the Israeli government believes that improved relations with Riyadh will serve other major goals.

First, Saudi Arabia’s lead in establishing relations with Israel, even if covert, is likely to induce other Arab states, especially the oil rich monarchies of the Gulf, to open their economies to Israeli investment and technical expertise, thus bringing Israel substantial economic benefits. Israel’s success in achieving this objective is critically dependent upon developing a significant, even if unacknowledged, relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Second, the Israeli government estimates that improved relations with the Saudi regime, the “guardian” of Islam’s two holiest sites, will help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Tel Aviv’s satisfaction. This means Israel continuing to control the entire territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea without giving the Palestinians any civil or political rights. Israel feels that with Saudi help, the status quo could be made acceptable to other Arab and Muslim countries as well since several of them, such as Egypt and Pakistan, are heavily dependent upon Saudi largesse.

Furthermore, Israel and Saudi Arabia have a common interest in preventing the democratisation of Arab countries. Authoritarian governments in the Arab world allow Israel to parade itself as the only democracy in West Asia. Saudi Arabia is mortally afraid of a democratic wave in the Arab world since it would further highlight the despotic nature of its regime. This apprehension drove its opposition to the democracy movements, especially in Egypt and Bahrain, during the short-lived Arab Spring.

The Saudi-Israeli rapprochement has been actively supported by the Trump administration. The United States is extremely interested in the formation of a joint front between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran, America’s principal adversary in West Asia. Jared Kushner, the U.S. President’s son-in-law and the administration’s point man on West Asia, has developed a special relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) in order to achieve this and other ends. He had used his leverage with MBS to prod the latter to accept Israel’s point of view on the Palestine issue before the Jamal Khashoggi murder stalled the expansion of the Saudi-Israeli relationship.

The rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv was moving apace until October 2, 2018, when Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident journalist, was murdered at the behest of the Saudi regime

in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. Senior officials of the two governments, including Mossad head Yossi Cohen, had clandestinely met several times. On the Saudi side, former senior aide to the Crown Prince, Saud al-Qahtani, and former deputy intelligence chief, Major General Ahmed al-Assiri, had played important roles in the secret negotiations with Israel.

However, the Khashoggi murder has thrown a spanner in the works for several reasons. First, the two principal Saudi interlocutors have been dismissed from their crucial positions in order to demonstrate to the international community that the Saudi regime is genuinely interested in bringing Khashoggi's murderers to justice.

Second, MBS, who many believe ordered the killing, has been the focus of intense criticism, including by leading Senators and Congressmen in the U.S., following the brutal murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi's body. He is also held responsible for the Yemeni misadventure, which has left thousands of civilians dead and millions on the verge of starvation. He cannot, therefore, afford to take greater political risks at this moment by continuing the parleys with Israel.

This does not mean that the Saudi-Israeli relationship will return to the level of hostility that had once existed between the two states. Rapprochement has been an ongoing process for close to two decades. It was dramatically expedited with the appointment of MBS as Crown Prince and the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia.

One can, therefore, conclude that their common hostility towards Iran and their close security relationship with the U.S. will eventually prompt Saudi Arabia and Israel to resume their covert relationship and eventually make it public. However, their contacts are likely to remain frozen for some time until the Khashoggi murder recedes from public memory. Yet the Saudi-Israeli rapprochement could be accelerated if MBS, who has been the driving force behind the Saudi policy of engagement with Israel, ascends to the Saudi throne in the near future.

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