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Israel and Saudi Arabia: Forging Ties on Quicksand

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Distrust of US-led efforts for a negotiated end to the Iranian nuclear crisis, animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood, a shared determination to defeat Al Qaeda, and questions about the reliability of the US as an ally have persuaded Saudi Arabia and Israel to go public with their tacit alliance despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two erstwhile enemies.

Commentary

LONG GONE are the days when Saudi Arabia was the only Arab country that had visa rules to bar Jews from entering the kingdom and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal gave visiting US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger the Protocols of Zion, a 19th century anti-Semitic tract, as a gift. Saudi Arabia still declines to forge official ties with Israel as long as it refuses to withdraw from territories it conquered during the 1967 war. But perceptions of common threats have expanded long-standing unofficial ties to the point that both the kingdom and Israel feel less constrained in publicly acknowledging their contacts and signalling a lowering of the walls that divide them.

As states, Saudi Arabia and Israel share few, if any common values, despite some cultural values that are common to Wahhabism, the austere form of Islam adopted by the kingdom, and ultra-orthodox Jews. But they increasingly have common interests. Both states perceive Iran, particularly an Iran that is a nuclear power, as an existential threat; both also share a determination to defeat the Muslim Brotherhood as well as Al Qaeda-inspired groups and defend as much of the political status quo in the region as possible against change that threatens to replace autocratic regimes with ones dominated by Islamist militants.

Breaching secrecy

A series of recent events indicate that those common interests have made Saudi Arabia, which projects itself as a the leader of the Arab world, less sensitive about going public about relations with Israel in the absence of a settlement of the Palestinian problem. As a result, Israel, which has long accommodated a Saudi need for secrecy, is also becoming more public about cooperation between the two states.

"Everything is underground, nothing is public. But our security cooperation with Egypt and the Gulf states is unique," said General Amos Gilad, director of the Israeli defence ministry's policy and political-military relations department "This is the best period of security and diplomatic relations with the Arab. Relations with Egypt have

improved dramatically” since last year’s military coup against Egypt’s first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother.

Describing Israel’s security border with Jordan, the only Arab state alongside Egypt to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, as the border between Jordan and Iraq, Gilad went on to say: “The Gulf and Jordan are happy that we belong to an unofficial alliance. The Arabs will never accept this publicly but they are clever enough to promote common ground.”

Despite repeated Saudi denials of any links to Israel and official adherence to an Arab boycott of anything Israeli, the kingdom has signalled a relationship in recent weeks with an encounter in Brussels between former intelligence chiefs of the two countries and the first time a Saudi publisher has published an Arabic translation of a book by an Israeli academic.

Step by step

The exchange in late May between Prince Turki bin Faisal al Saud, a full brother of Foreign Minister Prince Saud who headed Saudi intelligence for 24 years, and General Amos Yadlin, a former Israeli military intelligence chief, constituted the most high profile Saudi acknowledgement of relations. Saudis and Israelis have met before in public but Prince Turki went out of his way this time to promote a 2002 Saudi-sponsored peace plan that offers Arab recognition of the Jewish state in exchange for a full Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory and a solution for the Palestinians as a step-by-step process rather than a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

The exchange followed the controversial publishing of an Arabic translation of ‘Saudi Arabia and the New Strategic Landscape’ by Joshua Teitelbaum, a professor at Bar Ilan University’s Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. While Saudi newspapers have long published columns by left-wing, dovish Israeli writers opposed to their government’s policy, Teitelbaum’s book was the first by a mainstream Israeli writer published by a Saudi publisher.

The openings notwithstanding, Israelis and Saudis appear to differ in their expectations of how far closer relations can go. Prince Turki signalled in Brussels that he saw cooperation between the two states on specific issues as a first step towards a solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. That was a far cry from Gilad’s tone who compared Israel’s improved ties to conservative Arab states as “good weather” and cautioned that one should not forget that “clouds will come” in a region in which states are collapsing, tribes dominate and Israeli military superiority is its only guarantee.

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