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Unspoken Israeli-Saudi alliance targets Iran

By Chris Zambelis

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The machinations surrounding Iran's nuclear program continue to dominate international headlines. A closer look at the atmospherics in play indicates the presence of a web of competing narratives that seek to delineate the threats Iran allegedly poses to its neighbors and global security.

The boilerplate rhetoric out of Washington and US media regarding Iran is well known. But sorting through the cacophony of public threats of war, psychological operations, and propaganda broadcast by Israel and Saudi Arabia - Iran's primary regional adversaries - is equally crucial toward understanding the geopolitics surrounding the Iranian nuclear question and, in a broader sense, Iran's place in the region.

Alongside the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia have taken the lead in articulating a litany of purported threats emanating from the Islamic Republic. On May 21, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated the long-standing position held by Israel that views Iran as an existential threat: "Iran wants to destroy Israel and it is developing nuclear weapons to fulfill that goal."

Relying on a sectarian discourse, Saudi Arabia has also defined its fears of Iran in existential terms. A special series published by the Saudi daily Al-Jazirah just days before the Kingdom dispatched its security forces to Bahrain to suppress democratic opposition protests led largely by Bahrain's oppressed Shi'ite majority reflects Riyadh's deep-seated antipathy for the Iran. The inflammatory title of the series, "Safavid Iran's plans for the destruction of the Gulf States", is of

particular importance. The reference to Iran's Safavid legacy draws attention to the Persian Empire's adoption of Shi'ite Islam as its official religion. By highlighting Iran's Shi'ite character, Saudi Arabia is able to define the perceived threat from the republic in territorial as well as ideological and theological terms.

Paradoxically, Israel and Saudi Arabia are officially enemies. Yet they appear to be acting in lockstep - almost in a perfect symbiosis - when it comes to undermining and attacking Iran and painting it as a threat to regional and world peace. A sampling of the collective responses of both countries to matters related to Iran and other areas of mutual concern, such as the course of the uprisings in the Arab world, suggests that the Israeli-Saudi interface represents more than a temporary pact of convenience. Indeed, the convergence of their interests over Iran constitutes an unspoken strategic alliance that runs deeper than either side cares to admit.

Silence speaks volumes

Israel regularly lambastes Iran for supporting its nemeses Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. At the same time, it mutes any serious criticism of Saudi Arabia despite Riyadh's support for the militant Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies that serve as the intellectual and ideological infrastructure of al-Qaeda's brand of extremism.

Keen to preserve its military superiority in the Middle East, Israel has historically expressed strong opposition to attempts by the US and other major arms producers to sell advanced weapons platforms and defense systems to its neighbors - friends and foes alike. Yet Israel has tempered its usual disapproval of the sales of tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms by the US to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies over the past few years. In contrast to its reactions to similar deals concluded in the past, Israel has remained noticeably silent over the most recent of these sales, counted as among the largest arms-transfer agreements ever concluded by the US with foreign nations.

The reasons behind Israel's quiet acquiescence to the arms sales are telling. On the surface, the timing of the latest sales was designed to bolster Saudi Arabia's deterrence posture in the face of growing Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. They also signal Washington's commitment to Riyadh's defense amid intensifying tensions with Iran.

An emboldened Saudi Arabia keeps Iran on the defensive and preoccupied with outmaneuvering its neighbors in the Gulf region. Consequently, this scenario indirectly strengthens Israel's position relative to Iran. These circumstances are amenable to Israel because it does not perceive Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies as threats. On the contrary, their shared interest in containing Iran make Israel and Saudi Arabia natural allies.

Ever sensitive to the precariousness of Saudi Arabia's position when it comes to any hint of collaboration - both official and covert - with Israel, Israeli politicians are careful to play down the extent of their joint strategic interests with Riyadh. The geopolitics underlying the Israeli-Saudi relationship is not, however, lost by observers in Israel. Media and research institutes there often allude to the convergence of Israeli and Saudi interests when it comes to a range of topics

involving Iran. An opinion piece published by the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth in April 2011 titled "Our Saudi Arabian allies" illustrates this point.

While a similar set of dynamics is evident in Saudi Arabia's behavior toward Israel as it relates to Iran, Riyadh takes a different approach. It is quick to condemn Iran's nuclear program in public. Riyadh and some of its GCC partners have also gone as far as to threaten to initiate their own domestic nuclear-weapons programs in the event that Tehran were to achieve a nuclear capability.

Saudi Arabia has also implored the US to take action against Iran. According to a US diplomatic cable drafted in April 2008 and exposed by WikiLeaks, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz is reported have called on the United States to "cut off the head of the snake" in dealing with Iran while affirming the kingdom's commitment to work with Washington to undermine Tehran.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia is curiously reticent when it comes to any mention of Israel's nuclear arsenal. In addition to fielding one of the world's most technologically advanced and powerful conventional military forces, Israel boasts a nuclear-weapons inventory that may contain up to 400 warheads. Yet in contrast to its treatment of the Iranian nuclear program, Israel's nuclear arsenal does not constitute a Saudi concern. While the prospect of a nuclear-capable Iran may spur it to pursue its own nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia has never expressed any interest in matching Israel's nuclear arsenal with one of its own.

Saudi Arabia's deference to its quiet Israeli partner extends beyond the Iran portfolio and is especially evident in its approach to Palestine. As a regime that derives its legitimacy from its status as the self-proclaimed guardian of Islam's two holiest places, Saudi Arabia must tread carefully in how it navigates its tacit relationship with Israel.

Officially, the kingdom supports the Palestinian struggle for self-determination amid Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian land. But despite its formidable geopolitical and economic influence, it has been decades since Saudi Arabia has thrown its weight behind the Palestinian cause. This is the case despite widespread sympathy among Arabs and Muslims more broadly on Palestinian suffering.

Saudi Arabia's relative inaction toward Palestine is important considering the kingdom's willingness to engage forcefully on other issues that resonate with Arabs and Muslims. For example, it was in the forefront of organizing a global consumer boycott of Danish products after the publication of inflammatory cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish daily Jyllands-Posten in September 2005. Muslims around the globe applied a consumer boycott against Danish products, devastating that country's exports in a number of critical sectors. Saudi Arabia also recalled its ambassador to Denmark, hurting Copenhagen's diplomatic standing in the Middle East among the global Muslim community.

Saudi Arabia's official clerical establishment and media helped shape a powerful narrative that resonated among a wide constituency while Saudi diplomacy paved the way for Muslims to direct their ire toward Denmark. Its behavior during the height of the cartoon controversy is

illustrative of the kingdom's potential to shape global events in its favor relatively quickly.

The vigor and unity of purpose displayed by Saudi institutions in the diplomatic, economic, ideological and media realms in the name of Islamic solidarity during the cartoon controversy and on matters related to Iran are noticeably absent when it comes to pressuring Israel to withdraw from Palestinian land or refrain from continued construction of settlements in the occupied territories.

The US linchpin

The nature of the bond between Israel and Saudi Arabia should come as no surprise. The two countries constitute the pillars of an alliance network in the Middle East crafted and honed by the US for decades. In this regard, it would seem rational to conclude that Israeli and Saudi moves against Iran are sanctioned, encouraged, and actively facilitated by the United States.

After all, the US and Iran have been adversaries since the Islamic Revolution ousted the Shah in 1979. Any efforts by the Israelis and Saudis to undercut Iran, by definition, should further US interests.

Such a perspective would suggest that Israel and Saudi Arabia act as surrogates for advancing US interests related to Iran and other regional matters. To a great extent, this scenario applies. In a broad sense, the interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia appear to align with US interests in most respects over Iran. All three countries maintain an adversarial relationship with Iran and view it as a threat, in varying degrees, to their respective interests.

A consideration of the history of US foreign policy toward the Middle East lends credence to this argument. During the Cold War, Israel and Saudi Arabia stood alongside the United States in checking the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East and beyond and undermining Arab nationalism.

Emergent divergences and smokescreens

It is worth highlighting that major gaps also exist between the US on the one hand and Israel and Saudi Arabia on the other when it comes to their unique perceptions of and approaches to Iran. This divergence of interests is most apparent when it comes to how each actor assesses the potential impact a nuclear Iran will have on its respective strategic posture.

Despite the hardline rhetoric out of Washington, American planners may have already come around to reluctantly accepting the reality of a nuclear Iran somewhere down the line that will need to be engaged diplomatically. Even a limited rapprochement between the US and Iran would have a profound impact on the geopolitical map of the Middle East.

The hope of improved US-Iranian relations would immediately help ease many of the most acute regional tensions that keep the Middle East on the brink of war and global energy prices at record and unsustainable highs. This possibility would also pave the way for the development of lucrative economic ties between Washington and Tehran in critical sectors such as oil and natural

gas. In the long run, the relative importance of Israel and Saudi Arabia to the US would decline as a result of any kind of rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

In this context, Israel and Saudi Arabia not only have an interest in undercutting Iran; they are also heavily invested in the persistence of US-Iranian enmity. Israeli and Saudi planners are well aware that the US is powerful enough to recalibrate its strategic conception of the Middle East to account for major changes that include the normalization of relations with Iran all the while simultaneously maintaining constructive ties with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Alternatively, Israel's relentless threats and diatribes against Iran may have been conceived to achieve a different set of goals. For all its bluster, there is little evidence to indicate that Israel could successfully execute an attack against Iran's nuclear program and achieve any sort of military success. The scale of the regional conflagration and global economic catastrophe that would certainly follow an Israeli strike is also likely deterring Israel from following through with its threats.

Nevertheless, drawing the world's attention to Iran enables Israel to divert the eyes of international public opinion away from its ongoing occupation of Palestinian land; doing so provides it with the cover it needs to consolidate its hold permanently over the lives of millions of Palestinians and their natural resources - water, oil and natural gas - in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Defined as illegal under international law, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories continue to be constructed at record pace, creating new facts on the ground. Meanwhile, Palestinians are left to inhabit disconnected and impoverished enclaves reminiscent of the South African-style Bantustans born out of the apartheid era.

Conclusion

The unspoken alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia remains in full force as popular Arab revolts against tyranny transform the region. Heavily invested in the old status quo, Israel and Saudi Arabia (and its GCC partners) are marshaling efforts to lead a counterrevolution to co-opt fledgling democracies in countries such as Egypt that are seeing previously suppressed demands for freedom, accountability, dignity and independence shape a new politics.

Yet the interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia diverge greatly over events in Syria. On the surface, they should equally relish the possibility of Iran's most important ally crumbling. But only Saudi Arabia, a principal supporter of the political and violent militant factions making up the Syrian opposition, appears determined to destroy the Baathist regime.

Israel stands to lose a great deal in the event that Syria's Baathist regime falls. The regime has largely ignored Israel's occupation of its Golan Heights and the thousands of Israeli settlers who inhabit Syrian territory. This has allowed Israel to devote its military resources to other theaters. A post-Baathist order in Syria that sees the rise of an Islamist-oriented regime or the country plunged into years of internecine strife might witness an attempt to recapture the territory based on the model of armed resistance employed by Hezbollah against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon.

In spite of their differences over Syria, however, the course of regional events involving Iran and

other matters provide fertile ground for continued strategic cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia.