



Israel and the Gulf States —the Nature of Secret Cooperation

Michał Wojnarowicz

Israel has for many years maintained undisclosed contacts with the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf, despite the lack of official diplomatic relations. The foundation of the cooperation, especially with Saudi Arabia, is the fear of Iran's growing dominance in the Middle East. Despite the convergence of interests, normalisation of relations remains unlikely and is highly dependent on the resolution of the Palestinian question.

Unofficial Relations. Israel does not maintain diplomatic relations with Sunni monarchies from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), nor is it recognised by them. Efforts to establish diplomatic ties were made after the start of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the 1990s, when Israel opened trade offices in Oman and Qatar. These facilities were closed after successive Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, including the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 (Oman) and *Operation Cast Lead* in 2009 (Qatar). Israel currently has official representation at the International Renewable Energy Agency in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) capital of Abu Dhabi.

The lack of international recognition of Israel by the GCC states does not prevent the parties from maintaining informal contacts through international organisations or at global summits. According to press reports in September 2012, UAE Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the margins of the UN General Assembly. Israel and the Gulf States also maintain trade relations, but due to an official Israeli boycott, they are held with intermediaries from the U.S. or Europe. GCC countries also expressed their interest in using Israeli technologies, such as those for the desalination of water or missile defence systems.

Iran—the Common Enemy. The main factors behind the Israeli-Arab rapprochement are the destabilisation of the Middle East after the Arab Spring and the growing position of Iran. Israel recognises Iran's nuclear programme as a major threat to its security and, like the Gulf States, criticises the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. Opposition to Iran's regional ambitions is the cornerstone of security cooperation between Israel and the Sunni coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which includes intelligence cooperation and exchange of information. It is also speculated that the Saudis and the Gulf States would let Israel use their airspace in the event of a possible Israeli air strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. In turn, Iran accused Saudi Arabia of using Israeli weapons during the civil war in Yemen. Arab-Israeli cooperation has gained momentum since the change of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East since Donald Trump's election as president. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are working to tighten the U.S. stance towards Iran.

The convergence of interests of the Arab states and Israel was revealed during the ongoing Qatar diplomatic crisis.¹ Despite relatively good relations with Qatar, Israel supported Saudi Arabia and its allies,

¹ P. Sasnal, "Arab Diplomatic Crisis," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 22/2017, 6 June 2017.

and welcomed the expulsion of Hamas representatives from Qatar under Saudi pressure. Both sides criticise Qatar-based media outlet Al-Jazeera's coverage. It is in Israel's interest to maintain good relations between the GCC countries and Israel's official Arab allies, Jordan and Egypt, countries whose stability is directly attributable to Israeli security. Israel has agreed to Egypt ceding to Saudi control two islands essential to the freedom and security of shipping in the Red Sea. Israeli-Arab relations include security cooperation against terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Hezbollah (the latter recognised by the GCC as a terrorist organisation in 2016), and limiting the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Palestinian Question. The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major obstacle to the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab states. Israel has rejected the Arab Peace Initiative from 2002, which included Israel's recognition by the Arab states in return for withdrawing from the occupied territories and granting Palestinian refugees the right of return. Although GCC states (except Qatar) support Fatah and the Mahmoud Abbas government (which effectively control the West Bank), they have been increasingly critical of them in recent years. This has translated into a decline in financial support for the Palestinian Authority (PA). In April 2016, Saudi Arabia cut PA funds (estimated at \$20 million per month) as an expression of dissatisfaction with Abbas's policies. The contribution of the Arab states to the PA's annual budget has fallen by 50% in the past four years, and is currently estimated at \$900 million per year.

While the Arab governments are able to maintain pragmatic cooperation with Israel, Arab public opinion remains strongly anti-Israel. Although authorities are fuelling these attitudes, it largely limits their political manoeuvrability. Open support for Israel without resolving the Palestinian question or any future outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence would mean increasing pressure and criticism from its own citizens. Hence, to maintain internal stability and cooperation with Israel, preventing an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in the Arab states' interests. That was one of the reasons for Saudi Arabia to become involved in mediation during the Temple Mount crisis in July.² King Salman personally intervened to reopen the complex to prayer. An easing of critical rhetoric against Israel is also visible in some Arabic media.

At the same time, it is the Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, that can help break the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The participation of Arab countries in the negotiations would prove attractive for Israel as a way to break through its formal isolation in the Middle East. The U.S. also favours involving Arab countries in the peace process. In return for resuming the peace talks and making concessions to Palestinians (including freezing settlement building in the West Bank and alleviating the blockade of the Gaza Strip), the GCC was to offer Israel direct telecommunications connections, open airspace for Israeli airlines, and allow Israeli athletes and entrepreneurs to stay on their territory. Arab states have the possibility to mediate between Fatah and Hamas and increase financial support for the Palestinian economy.

Conclusions. The informal alliance between Israel and the Sunni monarchies will remain as long as the parties feel threatened by Iran's rising power and the destabilisation of the region. However, shared interests may not be enough for Israel's dialogue with the Arab states to become official, or to alter the anti-Israeli attitude in international organisations. As things stand, normalisation would bring unacceptable internal costs for the Arab states, and the potential escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would lead to them tightening their policy towards Israel, as happened in the past. Israel's relations with the Arab states are also used by Iran and its allies as a political tool to attack "Sunni hypocrisy," and to increase its influence in the region and among Palestinians. At the same time, the possibility of partial normalisation of relations with Middle Eastern states and the related benefits (international recognition, new markets, and the import of energy resources) may lead Israel to make concessions in the peace process.

The anti-Iranian dimension of Arab-Israeli relations can be a challenge for EU Middle East policy, which aims to support the nuclear deal with Iran. At the same time, these relations contribute to trust-building measures in the Middle East, which is in line with the EU's policy of decreasing regional tensions. The EU can use its available tools to support civilian Israeli-Arab cooperation (e.g., in renewable energy), but only at the stage of official normalisation of relations and with a view to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

² M. Wojnarowicz, "Temple Mount Access Crisis," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 44/2017, 27 July 2017.