

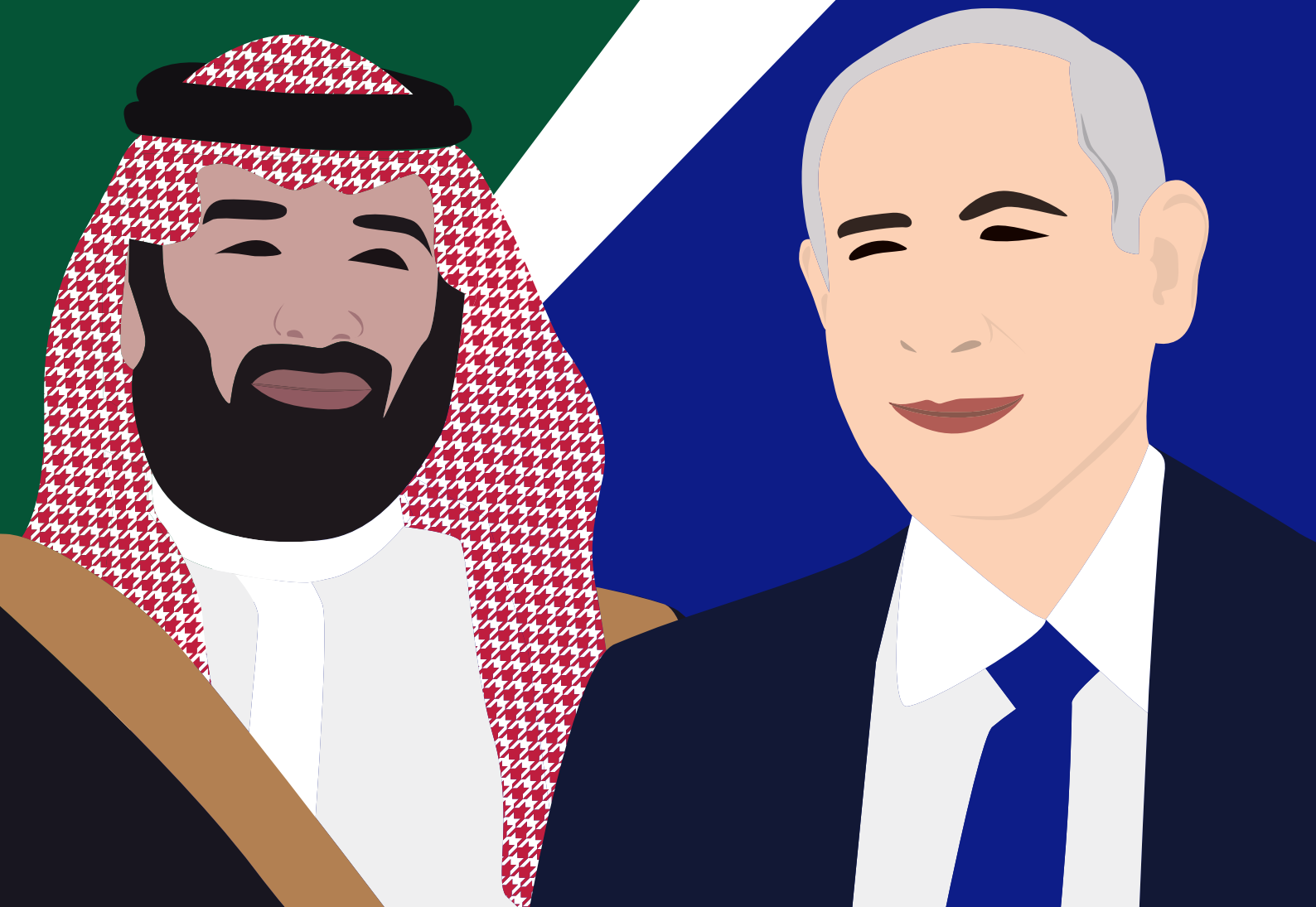


Middle East
Centre

JUST BELOW THE SURFACE

ISRAEL, THE ARAB GULF
STATES AND THE LIMITS
OF COOPERATION

IAN BLACK



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Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation

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About the Author

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Abstract

For over a decade Israel has been strengthening links with Arab Gulf states with which it has no diplomatic relations. Evidence of a convergence of Israel's strategic views with those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain has accumulated as all displayed hostility to Iran's regional ambitions and to United States President Barack Obama's policies during the Arab Spring. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has highlighted the Iranian threat and has felt much greater room for foreign policy manoeuvre given the continued marginalisation of the Palestinians. Netanyahu, who opposes an independent Palestinian state, has been greatly encouraged by the policies of US President Donald Trump. Long-standing Israeli security and commercial ties with the Gulf, already becoming more visible, look set to develop further, though overt military cooperation is improbable. Geopolitical and generational changes have made their mark among Gulf elites but the rivalry with Iran as well as domestic and pan-Arab public opinion will constrain any normalisation of Saudi and allied relations with Israel, assuming there is no progress towards an acceptable resolution of the Palestinian issue. None seems likely for the foreseeable future.

“What is happening in practice with Arab states has never happened in our history, even when we signed peace agreements. In practice, cooperation in different ways and at different levels isn’t necessarily (visible) above the surface, but what is below the surface is far greater than at any other period in Israel’s history. It is a huge change.

Benjamin Netanyahu, September 2017¹

Introduction

No formal relations currently exist between Israel and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), led by Saudi Arabia. Israel, by contrast, has peace treaties with two of its neighbours, Egypt and Jordan, signed in 1979 and 1994, the latter in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Over the last dozen years, however, links between Israel and several GCC states have developed to the extent that they have transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Over roughly the same period, prospects for an acceptable resolution of the Palestinian question have deteriorated insofar as a two-state solution, which enjoys broad international and Arab support, has little chance of being reached.

Significant changes began in the mid-1990s when Qatar and Oman (with Tunisia and Morocco) established trade relations with Israel on the grounds that a peace process, albeit an interim one, was under way between Israel and the PLO.² These public connections were severed in the wake of the Second Intifada in 2000, though discreet ties continued. Wider developments also began to alter regional dynamics.

¹ Raphael Ahren, ‘Netanyahu hails “best-ever” ties to Arab world’, *Times of Israel*, 6 September 2017. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-hails-best-ever-ties-to-arab-world/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

² Mauritania established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999 and severed them in 2010.

Common hostility to Iran and its allies is the main factor. Others include the growing perception of US disengagement from the Middle East, the emergence of assertively nationalist rulers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), divisions between Arab states, impatience with the divided Palestinians and a realisation in Gulf capitals of the benefits of security, economic and technological links with an unassailably powerful Israel, both for their own sake and because of the US approval that brings. Israel's gains too are clear, if limited by comparison.

This paper traces the convergence of views and interests between Israel and the Gulf states. It argues that there are constraints on public links because of the emotive power of the unresolved Palestinian issue, even if GCC members did little more than pay it lip service in the past. The paper shows that Israeli officials recognise that fact but still work to promote multiple connections with what are defined as 'moderate Sunni states', and suggests that the Second Lebanon War of 2006 marked a step change in this continuing process.

In the wake of that conflict, then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert met Saudi Arabia's National Security Adviser Bandar bin Sultan, providing a rare if unintended glimpse of a still largely secret relationship. Exposure of that encounter, denied in Riyadh, enraged the Saudis.³ Olmert tellingly made no reference to seeing Bandar when he published his memoirs. Israel's clandestine relations with Arab countries are considered a national security issue by the military censorship authorities and a ministerial committee that vets publications by officials and politicians. Secrecy is a central element in a set of connections that have to a considerable degree changed the Middle East.

The Arab Peace Initiative

The Olmert–Bandar meeting did not take place in a vacuum. The 11 September 2001 al-Qaida attacks marked a geopolitical nadir for the Saudis, who tried to limit the damage by adopting a more pragmatic approach to Israel. In March 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz launched what became the Arab Peace Initiative (API). This represented the most ambitious collective Arab response to Israel to date. It offered Israel recognition by the Arab League's 22 members in return for a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a 'just' and 'agreed upon' solution to the refugee question.⁴ The timing, however, was catastrophic – announced at a Beirut summit on the day a Palestinian suicide bombing killed 30 elderly Israelis celebrating Passover. Responses in Israel mainly ranged from the lukewarm to the openly hostile.⁵

Other developments contributed to the convergence of views between Israel and several Arab states. Exposure in 2002 of Iran's secret uranium enrichment facility at Natanz

³ Interview, former Israeli intelligence official.

⁴ On the API see Elie Podeh, *Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), pp. 304–23.

⁵ Caroline Glick, 'Our World: Olmert's Saudi Friends', *Jerusalem Post*, 4 December 2006. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Our-World-Olmerts-Saudi-friends> (accessed 6 March 2019).

(likely leaked by Israel)⁶ was followed in 2003 by Tehran's empowerment in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq. This sharpened the focus on the Islamic Republic's influence and aspirations, including a potential threat to Israel's undeclared nuclear monopoly. In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan warned of the appearance of a 'Shi'a crescent' across the region.⁷ The assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 appeared from the start to implicate Syria and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. In January 2006 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad held his first meeting in Damascus with his recently-elected Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In December, at the Mecca summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust in 'a brazen act of one-upmanship that left the Al Saud [House of Saud] mortified and unable to respond'.⁸

The Second Lebanon war of 2006, in which Hezbollah inflicted serious blows to superior Israeli forces, boosted concerns about challenges from Tehran, whether defined in sectarian terms or not. In July of that year a Saudi official condemned Hezbollah's incursion and the abduction of two Israeli soldiers, describing it not as 'legitimate resistance' but a 'miscalculated adventure'. That statement was believed to be the work of Bandar, 'a loose cannon' acting without authorisation.⁹ The Saudi foreign ministry then condemned Israel and demanded an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon.¹⁰ 'There seemed to be a common interest in dealing Hezbollah and in parenthesis Iran a serious blow', recalled Daniel Kurtzer, US Ambassador to Israel until 2005, 'but it was only later when the Israeli response was seen to be too harsh that the Arabs started backing off'.¹¹ Saudi clerics 'seized upon the war to highlight the caution, immobility, impiety and – some cases, illegitimacy – of the Saudi regime'.¹² In August, Assad said the conflict had exposed 'half men' (*ashbah al rijal*) – a pejorative reference to the opposition of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan to Hezbollah.

Olmert's meeting with Bandar came as Israel was reportedly making efforts to discuss the Shi'a threat and the Saudis' ideas for peace. One unconfirmed report also described a meeting at this time in Aqaba between Bandar, the head of Jordanian intelligence and Mossad Director Meir Dagan, who agreed to 'build up and accelerate intelligence exchanges' to deal with Iranian threats.¹³

⁶ Jeffrey Lewis, 'That Secret Iranian "Nuclear Facility" You Just Found? Not So Much', *Foreign Policy*, 3 March 2015. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/03/that-secret-iranian-nuclear-facility-you-just-found-not-so-much/> (accessed 6 March 2019)

⁷ King Abdullah II of Jordan, *Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 280–2.

⁸ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey, 'Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy', *RAND Corporation* (2009), p. 24. Available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG840.pdf (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹ Interviews, former British diplomats.

¹⁰ David Ottaway, *The King's Messenger: Prince Bandar bin Sultan and America's Tangled Relationship with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), pp. 255–6.

¹¹ Interview, Daniel Kurtzer, US ambassador to Israel, 2001–5.

¹² Wehrey et al., 'Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam', p. 24.

¹³ 'A Secret Regional Alliance Against Iran', *Intelligence Online*, 20 October 2006. Available at <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/political-intelligence/2006/10/20/a-secret-regional-alliance-against-iran,23406406-eve> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Ongoing Interpretation

Known events like the Olmert–Bandar encounter are few and far between. But that does not mean that the development of Israeli–Gulf links cannot be traced, at least in broad outline, though this does require careful and ongoing interpretation. There is a consensus in academic research and serious media coverage of the Middle East that these ties reflect changing geopolitical realities,¹⁴ though often without elaboration. Understanding is complicated by the fact that the issue is discussed *relatively* openly in Israel but is still taboo, albeit to different degrees, in Arab states.

If 2006 was a key year, the convergence of regional positions became more apparent in 2007.¹⁵ It grew during the Arab Spring and Obama’s second term, and accelerated along with the Syrian Civil War and Iran’s involvement in it. US Secretary of State John Kerry noted that the ‘new alignment of interests between Israel and the Sunni Arab countries in the region against Iran presented an opportunity to shuffle the deck.’¹⁶ The trend continued with negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) of 2015 and after Trump entered the White House in January 2017, carrying out his threat to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018. Netanyahu’s visit to Oman in October 2018 for talks with Sultan Qaboos bin Said, accompanied by the head of the Mossad, was a recent high-profile landmark.

Nevertheless, there is a sharp imbalance of attitudes between the two sides as well as important distinctions between the Arab states involved. Israel has had a clear interest in deliberately advertising this rapprochement but without revealing secrets – as illustrated by Netanyahu’s statement quoted at the beginning of this paper. ‘It’s very carefully drafted to give a positive message without spilling the beans’, explained Dore Gold, former foreign ministry director general.¹⁷ Arabs repeatedly complain that Israeli leaks or indiscretions ignore their sensitivities. Gold and other Israelis counter that they generally keep quiet out of respect for the wishes of the other side.¹⁸

The relationship between Israel’s attitude to the Palestinians and its ties with the wider Arab world is a theme that goes back to the early days of the Zionist enterprise. The fundamental aspiration since 1948 has been to establish discreet relations with Arab states and to thus bypass, pressure or weaken the Palestinians. In the past, the Gulf side – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain (in order of importance) – shunned exposure of links with Israel because of the risk of backlash from domestic, Arab and Muslim public

¹⁴ ‘The Saudi Revolution Begins: How to ensure Muhammad bin Salman’s reforms succeed’, *The Economist*, 23 June 2018; René Rieger, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Relations: Diplomacy and Mediation in Conflict Resolution* (New York: Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2017), pp. 23–4.

¹⁵ Giorgio Cafiero and Andrea Petrelli, ‘What’s all this Talk about a Gulf-Israel Alliance?’, *Huffington Post*, 22 May 2017. Available at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whats-all-this-talk-about-a-gulf-israel-alliance_us_5923d188e4bob28a33f62f26 (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶ John Kerry, *Every Day is Extra* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 443.

¹⁷ Interview, Dore Gold.

¹⁸ Reuters, ‘Israel Has Secret Contacts with Saudi Arabia, Senior Minister Reveals’, *Haaretz*, 20 November 2017. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-has-secret-contacts-with-saudi-arabia-senior-minister-reveals-1.5466779> (accessed 6 March 2019).

opinion over ‘normalisation’ (*tatbi*‘) with the Jewish state. That has changed to some extent in recent years. Qatar has long behaved more independently, and more so since the start of the blockade imposed by the ‘anti-terrorist’ quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt in June 2017. So has Oman, which has closer relations with Iran than its fellow GCC members.

Still, with occasional exceptions, secrecy and deniability about dealing with Israel, however implausible, remain the norm. That means it is difficult to confirm media reports which may be motivated by the escalating divisions and polarisation of inter-Arab and Middle Eastern politics. Propaganda, misinformation and deliberate opacity are significant barriers to understanding.¹⁹ However, these were part of the story long before the idea of ‘fake news’ began to attract the attention it has recently been enjoying.

Three Levels

Israeli officials describe their current approach to the Arab world as operating on three levels: the first is secret security, intelligence and military cooperation – underpinned by public messaging and diplomatic strategies. The second level involves trade, including hi-tech, and plans for regional transport links. The third, less significant but more visible, is classified as people-to-people, i.e. sporting or cultural contacts.

The general lack of substantive details and the conflation of all Arab countries in public statements by Netanyahu mean that the first category is especially opaque. It is widely agreed, for example, that Israel’s role in fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula since 2015 – providing intelligence and deploying drones and fighter aircraft – has brought military cooperation with Egypt to an unprecedented level, making the neighbours ‘secret allies in a covert war against a common foe’ – despite Egyptian denials.²⁰ Israel’s security relations with Jordan are also extremely close. But that does not mean there is a similar level of military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, or, further afield, with Morocco.²¹

Israeli politicians and officials occasionally refer to intelligence coordination with Arab states regarding Iran and counter-terrorism. In November 2017, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lt General Gadi Eisenkot made headlines when he offered to share intelligence on Iran with Saudi Arabia – noting that the two countries shared ‘many

¹⁹ ‘Iranian Regime-Linked Media Claims Israeli F16s are in Saudi Arabia’, *Times of Israel*, 22 June 2017. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-regime-linked-media-claims-israeli-f16s-are-in-saudi-arabia/> (accessed 6 March 2019)

²⁰ David D. Kirkpatrick, ‘Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, with Cairo’s O.K.’, *New York Times*, 3 February 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/world/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-sinai-egypt.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²¹ ‘Israel–Morocco Relations: Opportunities to Advance Cooperation’, *MITVIM*, August 2018. Available at http://www.mitvim.org.il/images/Israel-Morocco_Relations_-_Opportunities_to_Advance_Cooperation_-_August_2018.pdf (accessed 6 March 2019).

common interests'.²² Western sources confirm the existence of such cooperation in the Gulf, but its nature and extent remain largely unknown. 'The Israeli intelligence folks who have gone to these countries have met the leaders', said a former senior US diplomat. 'They know each other fairly well'.²³ Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton 'knew that the UAE and Saudi Arabia were ... working together behind the scenes with the Mossad to counter Iranian influence'.²⁴

According to a former senior Saudi official, cooperation increased markedly during Obama's second term. 'The Obama administration was hated by the Saudis and the Israelis. In a sense, it shunned them both. In response they deepened their cooperation. Exchanging intelligence is very important – comparing their findings to know exactly what is going on with Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and suspicious activities in the Red Sea.'²⁵ A former Israeli official makes precisely the same point: 'What made the politics of it acute was Obama. There was a sense that we were looking at an American administration that wasn't as committed to America's traditional friends. We had to make common cause because there was a sense of being left alone to fend for ourselves. Unwittingly, Obama contributed very significantly to the build-up of relations between us and the UAE and the Saudis.'²⁶

Projects for regional economic cooperation are more public if they involve Egypt or Jordan, but the long-standing Arab League boycott of Israel is now only 'sporadically applied and ambiguously enforced'.²⁷ Israel's publicly available foreign trade data does not show any direct trade in recent years with countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE but an analysis of goods flows via third countries suggest the true amount is 'close to' \$1 billion annually with the potential for growth of up to \$25 billion.²⁸

Contacts involving sporting, cultural and religious events run counter to what little remains of the Arab League boycott and the programme of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement which has made advances in Europe and the US in recent

²² Majdi al-Halabi, 'Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces to "Elaph": No Intention to Attack Hezbollah in Lebanon' [in Arabic], *Elaph*, 16 November 2017. Available at <https://elaph.com/Web/News/2017/11/1177142.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²³ Interview, former senior US State Department official.

²⁴ Adam Entous, 'Donald's Trump New World Order', *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/06/18/donald-trumps-new-world-order> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁵ Interview, former senior Saudi official.

²⁶ Interview, Eran Lerman, former deputy Israeli national security adviser.

²⁷ Martin A. Weiss, 'Arab League Boycott of Israel', *Library of Congress Congressional Research Service*, 25 August 2017. Available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=804229> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁸ 'Assessing Israel's Trade with its Arab Neighbours', *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, August 2018. Available at <https://institute.global/insight/middle-east/assessing-israels-trade-its-arab-neighbours/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

years.²⁹ How much these three existing (and to some extent overlapping) areas of cooperation are likely to develop in the future depends on the domestic constraints facing Arab states, Iranian behaviour and US policy – but above all on the state of the Palestinian question when once automatic pan-Arab solidarity, at least at the declaratory level, can no longer be taken for granted.

Overall Israeli–Gulf relations have been characterised as a ‘tacit security regime’³⁰ and ‘tacit cooperation’.³¹ Yet it remains unclear how a de facto alliance or even joint operations could be turned into a wider strategy, for example in a clash with Iran or another war between Israel and Hezbollah. The unilateral reimposition of US sanctions on Tehran in 2018 continues to carry the risk that Iran may retaliate by withdrawing from the JCPoA and blocking the Strait of Hormuz, a potential scenario for joint or coordinated US–Gulf–Israeli military action.³² In August 2018, Netanyahu publicly warned, after Houthi rebel missile attacks on Saudi tankers, that Israel would deploy its military as part of an ‘international coalition’ if Iran were to block the Bab el-Mandeb strait that links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and controls access to the southern Israeli port of Eilat.³³ The Saudi announcement of a ‘Red Sea entity’ to protect maritime security reflected apparently similar thinking, though without mention of Israel.³⁴ Israeli threats to hit Iranian military assets, including short-range ballistic missiles in Iraq – as it has repeatedly done in Syria – were another indication of readiness to widen the regional confrontation.³⁵ The US-organised Warsaw Middle East conference in February 2019 deliberately focused attention on Israeli and Gulf hostility to Iran. It allowed Netanyahu to publicly appear alongside Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini ministers or officials and to argue that all had spoken ‘with unusual force, clarity and unity against the common threat of the Iranian regime’.³⁶

²⁹ Nathan Thrall, ‘BDS: How a Controversial Non-Violent Movement has Transformed the Israeli–Palestinian Debate’, *The Guardian*, 14 August 2018. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/14/bds-boycott-divestment-sanctions-movement-transformed-israeli-palestinian-debate> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁰ Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, ‘Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States: Toward the Emergence of a Tacit Security Regime?’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 38/3 (February 2017), pp. 398–419. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2017.1292375> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³¹ Uzi Rabi and Chelsi Mueller, ‘The Gulf Arab States and Israel since 1967: From “no Negotiation” to Tacit Cooperation’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44/4 (September 2017), pp. 576–92. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1360013> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³² Interview, Oded Eran, former Israeli ambassador to Jordan.

³³ ‘Israel Warns Iran of Military Response if it Closed Key Red Sea Strait’, *Reuters*, 1 August 2018. Available at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-redsea/israel-warns-iran-of-military-response-if-it-closed-key-red-sea-strait-idUKKBN1KM5VA> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁴ ‘Saudi Arabia, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden States Reach Agreement for Cooperation’, *Arab News*, 12 December 2018. Available at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1419711/saudi-arabia> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁵ ‘Israel Signals it Could Attack Iranian Weaponry in Iraq’, *Reuters*, 3 September 2018. Available at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-iran-iraq/israel-signals-it-could-attack-iranian-weaponry-in-iraq-idUKKCN1LJoQF> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁶ Patrick Wintour and Oliver Holmes, ‘Mike Pence Chides US Allies at Warsaw Summit on Iran’, *The Guardian*, 14 February 2019. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/14/us-and-israel-say-confrontation-with-iran-needed-for-peace> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Israel and the UAE

In 2018, Israel's only declared governmental presence in the Gulf was with the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in Abu Dhabi. Israel's envoy, uniquely, is accredited solely to IRENA, not to the UAE, a fact emphasised by both countries when the mission opened in 2015. Israel lobbied for the UAE to host the new body in return for agreement to an Israeli presence.³⁷ It marked the first time in nearly two decades that any official Israeli mission had been opened in an Arab country. In 2013 the Israeli foreign ministry launched an Arabic-language @IsraelintheGulf Twitter channel, part of a growing commitment to digital diplomacy. It stopped being used in 2014 but was re-launched as a 'virtual embassy' at a time of intensifying activity in early 2019.³⁸

Israel's links with the UAE are the most extensive within any of the Gulf states – 'pragmatic, transactional, technical' – and not always concealed.³⁹ Chairman of the Israeli Labour Party Avi Gabbay held talks with senior officials in Abu Dhabi in late 2018.⁴⁰ Netanyahu is also believed to have met Emirati leaders in Cyprus in 2015 to discuss how to tackle Iran after the signing of the JCPoA.⁴¹ High-level contacts were already routine. In 2009, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed was reported to have 'good personal relations' with his former Israeli counterpart, Tzipi Livni. The UAE 'believes in Israel's role because of their perception of Israel's close relationship with the United States, but also due to their sense that they can count on Israel against Iran', an Israeli diplomat told a US colleague, adding that Gulf Arabs 'believe Israel can work magic'.⁴² US Congressional opposition to the Dubai Port Worlds bid to run American ports in 2006 may have galvanised the Emiratis to deal more directly with Israel.⁴³ Problems over a secret deal to sell Israeli drones to the UAE in 2009 reportedly caused a deep rift in relations that was only resolved two years later.⁴⁴

Publicly there was a sensational setback in January 2010, when Mossad agents assassinated a Hamas operative, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in a Dubai hotel. Mabhouh was Hamas'

³⁷ Barak Ravid, 'Exclusive: Israel to Open First Diplomatic Mission in Abu Dhabi', *Haaretz*, 27 November 2015. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israel-to-open-diplomatic-mission-in-abu-dhabi-1.5426578> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁸ Barak Ravid, 'Israel Opens a "Virtual Embassy" to Gulf States', *Haaretz*, 21 July 2013. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/premium-israel-opens-gulf-virtual-embassy-1.5297843> (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁹ Interview, former British diplomat.

⁴⁰ Barak Ravid, 'Leader of Israeli Labor Party Made Secret Visit to UAE', *Axios*, 7 January 2019. Available at <https://www.axios.com/leader-of-the-israeli-labor-party-visited-uae-a87c95f8-c6da-4ee1-8628-8573da659328.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁴¹ Entous, 'Donald's Trump New World Order'.

⁴² 'Israel's Relations with the Gulf States Focus on Iran, Perception of Israeli Influence in Washington', *Wikileaks*, 19 March 2009. Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TELAVIV654_a.html (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁴³ Sigurd Neubauer, 'Israel: A Strategic Partner for the UAE?', *Gulf State Analytics*, 9 November 2017. Available at <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/israel-strategic-partner-uae/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁴⁴ Barak Ravid, 'Exclusive: The Secret Drone Deal that Created an Israel-UAE Rift', *Axios*, 11 February 2019. Available at <https://www.axios.com/secret-drone-deal-israel-uae-iran-netanyahu-mbz-48caa235-1ed8-45fe-b691-b9bd41223ebb.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

arms procurement link with Iran. The row that followed included a ban on anyone identified as Israeli entering the country, even on a foreign passport. But it was soon back to normal for discreet diplomacy and business.⁴⁵ ‘In such cases, you simply keep your head down and wait until it all blows over,’ said a Swiss-based Israeli who brokers deals in the Middle East. ‘You need to be sensitive... You simply stop, not even sending emails, until the tide turns.’⁴⁶ In December 2013, Israeli President Shimon Peres spoke from his Jerusalem office via satellite to 29 foreign ministers from Arab and Muslim countries at the Gulf Security Conference in Abu Dhabi. Israel’s minister of energy visited Abu Dhabi in 2014.

Known military cooperation has involved joint participation in exercises in the US and Greece. In August 2016, pilots from Israel and the UAE took part in a training exercise with pilots from Pakistan and Spain in the US. In 2017, the Israel and UAE air forces held a joint exercise with the air forces of the US, Italy and Greece. In 2018 UAE military officials reportedly visited an air base in southern Israel to review the operations of advanced US-made F-35 fighter jets, though this was denied by Israel.⁴⁷ Clandestine cooperation is thought to include Israeli intelligence surveillance of Iran and the supply of drones used in Yemen.⁴⁸ Israel has reportedly granted the UAE access to the Israeli-built Eros B satellite and its high-resolution imagery.⁴⁹

‘Pragmatic, Transactional, Technical’

The largest and most visible element of the Israel–UAE relationship is in business and trade, though no official statistics are available in either country. Israeli businessmen, using foreign passports, fly there regularly. ‘There is a huge amount of business going on’, says the Israeli representative of a multinational company who has an EU passport and regularly visits the UAE.⁵⁰ Research shows a focus on hi-tech, especially cybersecurity, irrigation technologies, medical supplies and the diamond industry.⁵¹ AGT International, owned by Israeli businessman Matti Kochavi, has reportedly supplied drones, electronic fences and surveillance equipment worth \$800m to protect the UAE’s borders and oil-

⁴⁵ Interview, Dore Gold.

⁴⁶ Shuki Sadeh, ‘The Badly Kept Secret of Israel’s Trade Throughout the Muslim World’, *Haaretz*, 19 January 2012. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/1.5167882> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁴⁷ Anna Ahronheim, ‘IDF Denies UAE Delegation Visited Israel to Study the F-35’, *Jerusalem Post*, 8 July 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-denies-UAE-delegation-visited-Israel-to-study-the-F-35-561913> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁴⁸ Interviews, Israeli and US sources.

⁴⁹ Neubauer, ‘Israel: A Strategic Partner for the UAE?’.

⁵⁰ Interview, Israeli businessman.

⁵¹ Ron Friedman, ‘Israelis doing Business in Dubai will Wait out Storm’, *Jerusalem Post*, 3 March 2010. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Israelis-doing-business-in-Dubai-will-wait-out-storm> (accessed 6 March 2019); Ronen Shidman, ‘Diamond Trade Binds Israel and the UAE Together’, *Calcalist*, 27 November 2018. Available at <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3750800,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

fields under the 'Falcon Eye' programme.⁵² Emirati officials describe this as a non-political decision motivated by national security interests.⁵³ AGT, like many private Israeli security companies, employs retired IDF officers. In 2014, *Haaretz* newspaper tracked a mysterious weekly flight between Tel Aviv and Dubai.⁵⁴ In 2016 the software company NSO Group was licensed by Israel's defence export controls agency to sell a surveillance app to the UAE and faced embarrassment when it was used to target a human rights activist.⁵⁵ The same firm reportedly supplied software to track members of the Qatari royal family.⁵⁶ Israeli businesses operate in the UAE via companies registered in Europe. Bills of lading are produced from an intermediary country, often Jordan or Cyprus.⁵⁷

Links with Israel are no longer an official taboo in the UAE, though the issue is not reported in local media. Generational change is one factor. Passionate support for the Palestinians, embodied by the UAE's founder Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan,⁵⁸ has faded. Emirati experts emphasise the two countries' common agenda. 'We were raised to see Israel as an enemy which occupied Arab countries', argued the head of an Abu Dhabi think tank. 'The reality now is that they are there whether you like it or not. We have common interests with them – and it's about Iran, about interests, not emotions.'⁵⁹ In the assessment of a former UAE diplomat, the current Iranian threat is akin to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which paved the way for a previously unacceptable US military presence in Saudi Arabia. 'If it wasn't for the Palestinian issue, this relationship with Israel would be very public and it would be very welcome because we need their military equipment and technology. But the relationship will remain under the radar.'⁶⁰

In the words of Jamal al-Suwaidi, the influential founder of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research:

⁵² 'Emirates "has security links with Israel"', *UPI*, 27 January 2012. Available at https://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2012/01/27/Emirates-has-security-links-with-Israel/UPI-73471327687767/ (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵³ Georges Malbrunot, 'Israel's Secret Business in the Persian Gulf' [in French], *Le Figaro*, 26 June 2010. Available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/mon-figaro/2010/06/25/10001-20100625ARTFIG00486-le-business-secret-d-israel-dans-le-golfe-persique.php> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵⁴ Rori Donaghy, 'Secret Flight Linking Israel to the UAE Reveals "Open Secret" of Collaboration', *Middle East Eye*, 22 December 2014. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/secret-jet-flying-between-israel-and-uae-567607953> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵⁵ 'Israeli Government Okayed Sale of Spyware that Exploits iPhones', *Times of Israel*, 7 September 2016. Available at http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-government-okayed-sale-of-spyware-that-exploits-iphones/?fb_comment_id=1239265926105474_1239706719394728 (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick and Azam Ahmed, 'Hacking a Prince, an Emir and a Journalist to Impress a Client', *The New York Times*, 31 August 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/middleeast/hacking-united-arab-emirates-nso-group.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵⁷ 'Assessing Israel's Trade with its Arab Neighbours'.

⁵⁸ Munib Masri, 'Why I'll never forget Sheikh Zayed', *Arabian Business*, 13 January 2018. Available at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/comment/387418-munib-masri-why-ill-never-forget-sheikh-zayed> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁵⁹ Interview, Abu Dhabi think-tank director.

⁶⁰ Interview, former UAE diplomat, Dubai.

The Palestinian cause is no longer at the forefront of Arabs' interests, as it used to be for long decades; it has sharply lost priority in light of the challenges, threats and problems that face countries of the region, altering their list of priorities as well as their perception of threats to their national security and the position of Israel within these threats compared to other threats posed, primarily by Iran, Hezbollah and terrorist groups, among others.⁶¹

Dissenting views, however, can be heard, unlike on other more sensitive issues. 'I am against normalisation', says Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a political scientist. 'I am against dropping the Palestinian issue because others are capitalising on it politically. Although Palestine is not the number one issue it is still an issue, in the heart maybe, not so much in the mind.'⁶² Still, state media controls illuminate Emirati priorities: Israeli media are not blocked online, unlike Qatari-affiliated sites in English or Arabic and Iranian media in Arabic.⁶³

Another factor is official hostility to Islamists, including Hamas, with its links to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The feeling is mutual: Emirati aid for Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque is condemned by Hamas. Arabic and English-language media outlets associated with the Brotherhood, Turkey and Qatar routinely expose and condemn UAE links to Israel. Qatari-based *Al Jazeera* TV is an important source, as is *Middle East Eye* in London. Emiratis recall, by way of retaliation, that the first Israeli mission in the Gulf opened in Doha in 1996. The hashtag #ArabZionists is used in abusive Twitter exchanges. Emirati backing for Mohammed Dahlan, the former Fatah security chief in Gaza and an adviser to Mohammed Bin Zayed, has made Palestinians vocal in their condemnation of Abu Dhabi. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is deeply hostile to Dahlan.⁶⁴ In 2018, the UAE reportedly made financial aid to Gaza conditional upon the establishment of a governing council made up of civilians, with Hamas representatives, but headed by Dahlan. Egypt agreed to the proposal but Hamas rejected it and the promised funds never arrived.⁶⁵ The Hamas decision in 2017 to sever its association with the Brotherhood does not appear to have reduced Emirati hostility.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Jamal Sanad Al Suwaidi, 'Dismantling the Palestinian issue: Manifestations, Causes and Consequences', *Gulf News*, 20 November 2018. Available at <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/dismantling-the-palestinian-issue-manifestations-causes-and-consequences-1.60456367> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁶² Interview, Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Dubai.

⁶³ Accessing banned websites produces this message: 'The site you are trying to access contains content that is prohibited under the "Internet Access Management Regulatory Policy" of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates'.

⁶⁴ Ittai Shickman, 'The Israeli Assassin who Teamed up with Mohammad Dahlan', *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 17 October 2018. Available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5372648,00.html?> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁶⁵ Zvi Bar'el, 'The Qatar Dilemma: When Even a Supporter of Terrorism Can Be an Israeli Ally', *Haaretz*, 22 August 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-the-qatar-dilemma-when-even-a-supporter-of-terrorism-can-be-an-israeli-ally-1.6388555> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁶⁶ Nidal al-Mughrabi and Tom Finn, 'Hamas Softens Stance on Israel, Drops Muslim Brotherhood Link', *Reuters*, 1 May 2017. Available at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-palestinians-hamas-document/hamas-softens-stance-on-israel-drops-muslim-brotherhood-link-idUKKBN17X1NA> (accessed 6 March 2019).

The UAE has played a role in growing people-to-people contact. Emirati (and Bahraini) teams took part in the prestigious Giro d'Italia cycle race, whose opening stages began in Israel in May 2018, drawing condemnation from the BDS movement for 'sports-washing of Israel's occupation and apartheid'.⁶⁷ An Israeli judo star took part in an international contest in 2017 in Abu Dhabi but was not permitted to display the Israeli flag. In October 2018, however, Israel's Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev attended another judo competition in Abu Dhabi and listened tearfully as the national anthem *Hatikvah* was played for the first time, to the fury of Emiratis (and others) opposed to normalisation. One keenly watched question is whether Israel will be invited to take part in the prestigious Expo 2020 Dubai.⁶⁸ Minister of Communications Ayoob Kara, a member of Israel's Druze minority and a Netanyahu loyalist, was invited to Dubai for an international conference in October 2018. Echoing his prime minister, Kara boasts that Israel's relations with the Arab world are better than ever before. 'The name of the game is the Iranian threat, not the Palestinian question', he insists.⁶⁹ In 2018, polling in Israel showed that the UAE was the second Arab country, after Egypt, that Israelis wanted to visit.⁷⁰

Saudi Arabia and Israel

In the wake of the 2006 Lebanon War, signs of a meeting of minds between Israel, Saudi and other Gulf states were increasingly visible at the diplomatic level – most eye-catchingly in the Olmert–Bandar encounter.⁷¹ Then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice found a January 2007 gathering of GCC, Egyptian and Jordanian foreign ministers in Kuwait remarkable for its lack of interest in the Palestinian question. 'Iran is number one, two, three and four', she later wrote.⁷² 'Suddenly the MEPP [Middle East Peace Process] fades into insignificance and you are beginning to get a strategic alignment between Israeli and Saudi interests,' recalled a former western ambassador to the kingdom.⁷³ Still, the API was relaunched at the 2007 Arab League Summit in Riyadh and duly welcomed as a 'positive signal' by the US.⁷⁴

Around the same time, Israeli officials started to publicly emphasise the 'substantive

⁶⁷ Peter Beaumont, 'Giro d'Italia Backs Down in Israel Row over Calling Start "West Jerusalem"', *The Guardian*, 30 November 2017. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/30/israel-threatens-giro-ditalia-bike-race-west-jerusalem-cycling> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁶⁸ Simone Somekh, 'Will Israel be Allowed to Participate in the 2020 Universal Exposition in Dubai?', *Tablet*, 7 March 2018. Available at <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/256995/will-israel-be-allowed-to-participate-in-the-2020-universal-exposition-in-dubai> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁶⁹ Interview, Ayoob Kara, Jerusalem.

⁷⁰ 'The 2018 Foreign Policy Index', *MITVIM*, October 2018. Available at <http://www.mitvim.org.il/en/10-news/284-mitvim-poll-on-israel%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy-2> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁷¹ For a historical survey see Eli Podeh, 'Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018', *The Middle East Journal* 72/4 (November 2018), pp. 563–86. Available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/710916/pdf> (accessed 18 March 2019).

⁷² Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (London: Broadway Books, 2017), p. 550.

⁷³ Interview, former western ambassador to Riyadh.

⁷⁴ Ian Black, 'Arab Leaders Offer Israel Guarded Peace Offer', *The Guardian*, 30 March 2007. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/30/israel> (accessed 11 March 2019).

change' of deep Arab anxiety about the threat from Iran. Amos Gilad, the influential director of the Defense Ministry's Political-Military Affairs Bureau, pointed to opportunities for enhanced relations with Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, based on common threat perception. Saudi irritation with the Palestinians was another factor after King Abdullah brokered the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007, only to see it collapse a few months later. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, attended the Annapolis Conference that November but stated that normalisation of relations with Israel would come only as a result of peace and not before it. A clearer sign of the improving relationship was Olmert's agreement to include Saudis in a committee of religious leaders administering the Muslim holy places on Jerusalem's Haram al-Sharif, which had long been the preserve of the Jordanian government, a status enshrined in the 1994 Peace Treaty. Prince Turki bin Faisal, former head of the Saudi General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) and ambassador to London and Washington (after Bandar), took to participating in track II fora with former and serving Israeli officials. One held in Britain in October 2008 focused on reviving the API. It was billed as a private event but was reported in Israeli media.⁷⁵

Saudi public positions remained critical of Israel in periods of tension, especially during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, launched in December 2008, when 1,400 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, were killed. Inter-Arab differences, however, were clear, with the Saudis, Kuwaitis and Egyptians boycotting an emergency summit convened by Qatar because of Doha's backing for Hamas.⁷⁶ Shortly afterwards came what was interpreted as Saudi acquiescence to Israeli military action against the Palestinian Islamist movement, involving air strikes in Sudan against arms convoys being sent from Iran to Gaza. US State Department cables showed the Israelis first mounted a diplomatic campaign to stop the weapons being delivered via Sudan. When that failed, they carried out long-distance raids along the Red Sea in January and February 2009,⁷⁷ giving prior notification to the Saudis.⁷⁸ By 2009, according to the deputy head of Israel's National Security Council, 'senior professionals in the intelligence and security fields from Israel and the Gulf countries were collaborating'.⁷⁹

In September that year, the US, Britain and France announced that Iran had been constructing a secret, second uranium enrichment facility in Fordow, near Qom. Unconfirmed reports suggested a visit to Saudi Arabia in 2010 by the Mossad Director, Meir Dagan, who was credited with a far more proactive secret alliance-building strategy (including operations targeting Iran) than his cautious predecessor. 'Israel and the Gulf states were in

⁷⁵ Avi Issacharoff, 'Saudi Official Presents New Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan', *Haaretz*, 20 October 2008. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5047812> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁷⁶ Ian Black, 'Gaza Split Prompts Arab Countries to Boycott Emergency Summit', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2009. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/15/gaza-egypt-saudi-qatar-summit> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁷⁷ Ian Black, 'WikiLeaks Cables: Sudan Warned to Block Iranian Arms Bound for Gaza', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2010. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/06/wikileaks-sudan-iranian-arms-gaza> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁷⁸ Interviews, Saudi, Israeli, British sources.

⁷⁹ Hagar Shezaf and Rori Donaghy, 'Israel Eyes Improved Ties with Gulf States after "Foothold" Gained in UAE', *Middle East Eye*, 18 January 2016. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-eyes-improved-gulf-states-relationship-ties-flourish-uae-895004700> (accessed 6 March 2019).

the same boat,' commented David Meidan, who ran the agency's Tevel political action and liaison department under Dagan.⁸⁰ 'All of a sudden the Mossad was teaching Farsi', another veteran recalled.⁸¹

Signalling also began about possible Saudi–Israeli military coordination. In July 2009, the *Sunday Times* reported that the Saudis had agreed to turn a blind eye to an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.⁸² Experts were sceptical about this and similar stories – always denied by Riyadh – in years to come. 'Joint Israeli–Saudi diplomatic and military coordination makes for good news copy, but it is probably fiction,' was one academic's judgement.⁸³ However, well-connected Saudi, Israeli and western sources with access to classified information suggest that agreement was indeed reached to stand down Saudi air defences to allow Israeli overflights.⁸⁴ Ehud Barak, Netanyahu's defence minister, recorded later that it was only in mid-2010 that he felt that Israel had a workable plan for an attack on Iran, despite continuing US (as well as internal Israel) opposition.⁸⁵

In the turbulent Arab Spring year of 2011, Saudi and Emirati anger over the overthrow of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak – and Obama's hesitant initial response but subsequent acquiescence in that – consequently reinforced long-standing hostility towards Islamist movements, including Hamas. The steady deterioration of the crisis in Syria and the growing role played by Iran and Hezbollah after 2012 were other factors of convergence between Israel and the GCC.

By the summer of 2012, however, Israel no longer believed that a strike on Iran would be possible – principally because of the damage it would do to relations with the US given Obama's opposition.⁸⁶ Following Hassan Rouhani's election as president, the P5+1 negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue accelerated, reaching an interim agreement in Geneva in November 2013. Netanyahu's messaging emphasised the negatives: 'The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbours to finally recognise that Israel is not their enemy,' he told the UN General Assembly a few weeks earlier. 'This affords us the opportunity to overcome historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes. Israel welcomes engagement with the wider Arab world. We hope that our common interests and common challenges will help us forge a more peaceful future.'⁸⁷ It was at this time that Saudi Arabia and the UAE 'made common cause with Netanyahu's government in pres-

⁸⁰ 'Imperfect Spies', Series 4. Available at <https://www.mossadfilm.com> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁸¹ Interview, former Mossad official.

⁸² Uzi Mahnaimi, 'Saudis Support Raid on Iran', *The Sunday Times*, 5 July 2009, p. 21.

⁸³ Bernard Haykel and Daniel Kurtzer, 'Middle East Frenemies', *Project Syndicate*, 13 December 2013. Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bernard-haykel-emphasizes-the-limits-to-saudi-israeli-cooperation-in-confronting-iran?barrier=accesspaylog> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁸⁴ Interviews, Saudi, Israeli, Western sources.

⁸⁵ Ehud Barak, *My Country, My Life: Fighting for Israel, Searching for Peace* (London: Macmillan, 2018), p. 425.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 435–6.

⁸⁷ 'PM Netanyahu addresses UN General Assembly', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 October 2013. Available at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2013/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-UN-General-Assembly-1-Oct-2013.aspx> (accessed 6 March 2019)

surging us,' in the words of a senior Obama aide.⁸⁸ Yousef al-Otaiba, the well-connected UAE ambassador to Washington, was heavily involved in these efforts.⁸⁹ The Emiratis were more open about their contacts with the Israelis than the Saudis.⁹⁰ Agreement on Iran did not, however, mean agreement on the Palestinian issue. In 2014, in the wake of that summer's assault on Gaza, Netanyahu reportedly met Prince Bandar to discuss a Saudi effort to relaunch the peace process in order to unite the region against Tehran, but talks on a draft document collapsed.⁹¹

Like the Emiratis, the Saudis have engaged Israeli companies, especially in the security sphere. One was a subcontractor in the high-tech barrier constructed from 2014 by the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS) along the kingdom's 600-mile border with Iraq, according to a senior veteran of the Israeli defence establishment.⁹² The National Cyber Security Directorate set up in the prime minister's office in 2011, was a key player. In 2012, when hackers breached the computer system of Saudi Aramco, the national oil company, Israeli businesses were involved on an 'ongoing basis' through off-shore companies.⁹³ In 2018, it was reported that the Israeli company NOS had supplied the software used to track murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi.⁹⁴ Israel reportedly sold drones to Saudi Arabia via South Africa⁹⁵ but denied that it had sold its 'Iron Dome' system to defend the kingdom from missile attacks by Yemeni Houthi rebels.⁹⁶ In 2018 Israeli media (subject to routine military censorship) reported for the first time that the IDF chief of staff and his Saudi counterpart had met at a Washington conference for commanders of US-allied armies.⁹⁷ The Ministry of Defence in Riyadh denied the story.⁹⁸

⁸⁸ Ben Rhodes, *The World as it is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: Bodley Head, 2018), p. 251.

⁸⁹ Entous, 'Donald's Trump New World Order'.

⁹⁰ Interview, former US diplomat.

⁹¹ Barak Ravid, 'Scoop: Israel Rejected 2014 Saudi Proposal on Palestinian Peace Talks', *Axios*, 12 February 2019. Available at <https://www.axios.com/netanyahu-rejected-saudi-diplomatic-offer-gaza-war-62b8c2f6-132b-4e4a-b2af-c71933ba34b6.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹² Interview, former senior Israeli military official.

⁹³ Jonathan Ferziger and Peter Waldman, 'How Do Israel's Tech Firms Do Business in Saudi Arabia? Very Quietly', *Bloomberg*, 2 February 2017. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-02-02/how-do-israel-s-tech-firms-do-business-in-saudi-arabia-very-quietly> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁴ 'How a Chilling Saudi Cyberwar Ensnared Jamal Khashoggi', *Washington Post*, 7 December 2018. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-a-chilling-saudi-cyberwar-ensnared-jamal-khashoggi/2018/12/07/f5f048fe-f975-11e8-8c9a-860ce2a8148f_story.html?utm_term=.6a3f7c65aa79 (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁵ Maayan Groisman, 'Report: Saudi Arabia Buys Drones from Israel through South Africa', *Jerusalem Post*, 30 March 2016. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Saudi-Arabia-purchases-drones-from-Israel-through-South-Africa-449779> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁶ Jack Khoury and Yaniv Kubovich, 'Israel Denies Reports Saudi Arabia Purchased Iron Dome Missile Defense Systems', *Haaretz*, 14 September 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/israel-denies-reports-saudi-arabia-purchased-iron-dome-missile-defense-systems-1.6469295> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁷ Anna Ahronheim, 'Report: IDF Chief of Staff Eisenkot met with Saudi Counterpart', *Jerusalem Post*, 17 October 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-IDF-Chief-of-Staff-Eisenkot-met-with-Saudi-counterpart-569585> (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁸ Habib Toumi, 'Saudi Arabia denies meeting with Israel', *Gulf News*, 18 October 2018. Available at <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/saudi-arabia-denies-meeting-with-israel-1.2291145> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Intelligence Cooperation

The nature and extent of Israeli–Saudi intelligence cooperation remains a closely-guarded secret. Unofficial Saudi spokesmen admit that it exists but insist it is narrowly confined to Iran and counter-terrorism. In the words of one well-connected commentator, it takes place ‘at middle management level’.⁹⁹ ‘Fetishising non-existent collaboration between #Saudi/GCC states and #Israel has become a trend in western media/think tank circles,’ was a typically dismissive argument.¹⁰⁰ A typical Saudi claim is that the Israelis are exaggerating for their own propaganda purposes.



Foreign governments with close connections to both countries and no particular axe to grind believe that the two maintain a hot line for emergency contact as well as holding regular talks. ‘There is now contiguity between the Israelis and Saudis’, says a former senior western intelligence official. ‘You have effectively the kind of security relations between countries that exist when they share a border. There are practical things that need to be sorted out, so you end up with a routine relationship on a regular basis which can then create more senior contact and a more strategic outlook on both sides.’¹⁰¹ In 2013, Bandar bin Sultan, by this point head of the Saudi GIP, met Mossad Director Tamir Pardo at a London hotel.¹⁰² GIP officials were ‘pleased as punch’, a specialist newsletter reported in October 2016. ‘There has never been such active cooperation between the two countries, in terms of analysis, human intelligence and interception on Iran and movements loyal to it such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units.’¹⁰³

Well-placed Saudi sources complain, however, that Israel has not always responded to requests for intelligence, even when submitted via the US. They cite the example of the 2009 attacks on Hamas weapons convoys in Sudan – illustrating Israel’s capabilities – and complain that it did not cooperate in interdicting Iranian missiles delivered from Bandar Abbas to al-Hudaydah in Yemen. There are also indications of a debate within the Israeli intelligence community about the value of links with the Saudis and reticence about responding to their requests.¹⁰⁴ In some quarters, the relationship is described as a ‘one-way street’ in which Israel gives the Saudis information without getting anything of similar value in return. Israel’s highly advanced technological capabilities, it is said, are not matched by detailed Saudi knowledge of Yemeni tribes, Arabs in Iranian Khuzestan or

⁹⁹ Interview, Saudi source.

¹⁰⁰ See tweet (pictured) by Mohammed Khalid Alyahya, @7yhy, 15 October 2015. Available at <https://twitter.com/7yhy/status/654728254310342657> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁰¹ Interview, former senior western intelligence official.

¹⁰² Interview, former senior western diplomat.

¹⁰³ ‘GIP Leads Pack in Cooperation with Israel’, *Intelligence Online*, 12 October 2016. Available at https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence_organizations/2016/10/12/gip-leads-pack-in-cooperation-with-israel,108185028-gra (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁰⁴ Michal Yaari, ‘Israel and Saudi Arabia: On the Way to Normalization?’, *MITVIM*, July 2018. Available at http://www.mitvim.org.il/images/English_-_Michal_Yaari_-_Israel-Saudi_Arabia_cooperation_-_July_2018.pdf (accessed 6 March 2019).

Iranian minorities in Balochistan, according to an Israeli with long experience of dealing with Riyadh.¹⁰⁵ Other factors limit the extent of the relationship. ‘I can understand that the Israelis would not have given the Saudis sensitive information because they couldn’t be confident that the Saudis would have protected the source – and that would have created a serious counter-intelligence problem,’ says a second former senior intelligence officer. ‘They are not natural partners. They have very different intelligence cultures. The Israelis are world-class and the Gulfies are not. The Israelis would not go into a relationship unless they get some proper dividend.’¹⁰⁶

Deepening Ties

Tantalising glimpses of deepening Saudi–Israeli relations have been multiplying since King Salman bin Abdulaziz came to the throne in 2015 and the JCPoA was signed with Iran. In June of that year, former Saudi general Anwar Eshki held a public meeting in Washington with Dore Gold, who was about to become director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Five earlier sessions had been held secretly.¹⁰⁷ Eshki visited Israel the following year with a delegation of academics and businessmen, though he publicly maintained the familiar official line: ‘There will not be peace first with the Arab states, but rather with the Palestinian brothers first’.¹⁰⁸

In April 2016, Egypt agreed to transfer back to Saudi Arabia the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba (leased to Egypt in 1950), sparking protests against the Cairo government and accusations that their relinquishing was prompted by promises of Saudi investment. Israel was consulted under the terms of the 1979 Peace Treaty. The Saudis said they respected the terms of the treaty, though Israeli officials were reluctant to discuss the issue publicly for fear of embarrassing President Sisi.¹⁰⁹ ‘Despite the disavowal of any direct contacts over this issue – and other important issues – over the years, the very fact that Saudi Arabia now undertakes to uphold in practice the obligations assumed by Egypt under the Peace Treaty means that Israel’s place in the region is no longer perceived by [...] Saudi Arabia as an anomaly to be corrected,’ commented an Israeli think tank. ‘This is a far cry from “normalisation”... which remains a dirty word in the Arab dictionary. But it is nevertheless a welcome ray of light, demonstrating the benefits of cooperation and coordination.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Israeli source.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, former senior western intelligence official.

¹⁰⁷ Eli Lake, ‘Israelis and Saudis Reveal Secret Talks to Thwart Iran’, *Bloomberg*, 4 June 2015. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-06-04/israelis-and-saudis-reveal-secret-talks-to-thwart-iran> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Akiva Eldar, ‘What Saudi Arabia can offer Israel’, *Al-Monitor*, 28 July 2016. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/saudi-arabia-egypt-visit-jerusalem-arab-peace-initiative.html#ixzz5YSciuHC3> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁰⁹ Gili Cohen, ‘Israel: Saudi Arabia Gave Written Assurances Over Freedom of Passage in Tiran Straits’, *Haaretz*, 12 April 2016. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-saudi-arabia-assured-freedom-of-passage-in-tiran-straits-1.5430378> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁰ Eran Lerman and Joshua Teitelbaum, ‘Sailing through the Straits: The Meaning for Israel of Restored Saudi Sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir Islands’, *BESA Center Perspectives Paper* 340, 17 April 2016. Available at <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/meaning-israel-restored-saudi-sovereignty-tiran-sanafir-islands/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Salman's reign saw far-reaching changes involving his son Mohammed, who he first appointed as defence minister and deputy crown prince, and later promoted to crown prince in June 2017. Mohammed bin Salman (MbS)'s ascent was accompanied by public messages about hostility to Iran and openness to Israel. MbS went so far as to call Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei 'a new Hitler'.¹¹¹ Netanyahu is said to have commissioned a profile of MbS from Israel's intelligence community.¹¹² From a Saudi lobbyist in Washington came a call for a 'collaborative alliance' with Israel to help Saudi desalination plans, part of MbS's ambitious Vision 2030 blueprint for economic reform and diversification. Both countries faced 'constant threats from extremist groups that are directly supported by the totalitarian government of Iran', argued Salman Ansari.¹¹³ The \$50bn NEOM project, on the country's northwest coast near the borders of Jordan, Egypt and Israel, seemed certain to attract Israeli interest and expertise.¹¹⁴ The Straits of Tiran, whose blockade by Egypt was the immediate trigger for the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, now faced a brighter future, reflected the Saudi commentator Abdelrahman al-Rashed, 'one where peace and prosperity prevail'.¹¹⁵ 'Since announcing the launch of NEOM', observed an Arab critic, 'the regime has embarked on an aggressive media campaign that is paving the way for the normalisation of ties with Israel, using the country's most renowned cultural producers'.¹¹⁶

Trump's announcement of his controversial decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017 was initially met by a muted response from Riyadh. Details of the President's proposed 'deal of the century' were discussed by his Middle East envoy (and son-in-law) Jared Kushner with MbS. Leaks suggested a key role for the Saudis in pressuring the Palestinians to accept the deal. Messaging about Israel intensified during the three-week trip made by the crown prince to the US in the spring of 2018 just as the weekly Gaza 'March of Return' protests were starting and unarmed Palestinians were being killed and wounded regularly by IDF snipers. MbS met pro-Israel American Jewish leaders, telling them the Palestinians should accept Trump's proposals or 'shut up and stop complaining'. He made clear that the Palestinian issue was not a priority for his government nor for the Saudi public. 'There are far more pressing and more important issues

¹¹¹ Thomas L. Friedman, 'Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last', *The New York Times*, 23 November 2017. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹² Interview, Israeli source.

¹¹³ Salman Al-Ansari, 'How Israel can contribute to Saudi's Vision 2030', *The Hill*, 10 November 2016. Available at <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/300447-how-israel-can-contribute-to-saudis-vision-2030> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁴ Max Schindler, 'Israeli Companies Talking to Saudi Arabia about \$500B. "Smart City"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 October 2017. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Israeli-companies-likely-talking-to-Saudi-Arabia-about-500-bil-smart-city-508429> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁵ Abdulrahman al-Rashed, 'Lessons from Tiran Island, a Witness to our History', *Al Arabiya English*, 18 August 2018. Available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/08/18/Lessons-from-Tiran-Island-a-witness-to-our-history.html#> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁶ Rosie Bsheer, 'How Mohammed bin Salman Has Transformed Saudi Arabia', *The Nation*, 21 May 2018. Available at <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-mohammed-bin-salman-has-transformed-saudi-arabia/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

to deal with, such as Iran.¹¹⁷ The prince acknowledged Jewish claims to Israel, declaring: 'I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land.'¹¹⁸ Soon afterwards, Palestinian demonstrators in Gaza burned pictures of the Saudi royals.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, MbS was reined in by his father on the Palestinian issue, with King Salman announcing that the 2018 Arab League Summit in Dhahran would be named the Al-Quds (Jerusalem) summit.¹²⁰ Later, a senior Arab diplomat in Riyadh was quoted as saying: 'In Saudi Arabia, the king is the one who decides on this issue now, not the crown prince.'¹²¹ Israeli media largely ignored the summit and its implications, noted one analyst. 'They were busy feeding the Israeli public juicy tales of a steamy love affair between Jerusalem and Riyadh.'¹²² Later, the king reiterated that the Palestinian cause remained a priority. The resumption of previously suspended Saudi financial aid to the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority (PA) was seen as an expression of this commitment as well as a response to Qatari support for Hamas in Gaza.¹²³

Another noteworthy development took place when an Air India flight flew from Delhi over Saudi Arabia and landed at Ben Gurion Airport. Agreement on this was a significant move, though it fell short of long-standing US-led efforts to persuade the Saudis to allow El Al, Israel's national airline, to do the same. It was hailed publicly as an unmistakable signal of normalisation, which neatly fitted Netanyahu's narrative of relations with key Arab states 'improving beyond imagination' without any link to the Palestinian issue.¹²⁴ It was, however, significantly qualified. 'Kerry came and asked the Saudis to let El Al fly

¹¹⁷ Barak Ravid, 'Saudi Crown Prince: Palestinians should take what the U.S. Offers', *Axios*, 29 April 2018. Available at <https://www.axios.com/saudi-crown-prince-tells-jewish-leaders-palestinians-should-take-what-they-are-offered-or-stop-complaining-1525025098-e7f0faf8-4f3f-442c-8478-6737ddb5a553.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader "Makes Hitler Look Good"', *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹¹⁹ 'Palestinians Condemn Saudi Crown Prince's Recognition of Israel', *The New Arab*, 5 April 2018. Available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/4/5/palestinians-condemn-saudi-crown-princes-recognition-of-israel> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²⁰ Daoud Kuttab, 'Palestinians Skeptical about Arab League Support for Jerusalem', *Al-Monitor*, 19 April 2018. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/palestine-arab-league-support-jerusalem-endowment-summit.html#ixzz5g5LRF5A4> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²¹ Stephen Kalin, 'As U.S. Pushes for Mideast Peace, Saudi King Reassures Allies', *Reuters*, 29 July 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-usa-saudi/as-us-pushes-for-mideast-peace-saudi-king-reassures-allies-idUSKBN1KJOF9> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²² Akiva Eldar, 'Netanyahu's Delusions on Saudi Arabia', *Al-Monitor*, 19 April 2018. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/israel-saudi-arabia-king-salman-benjamin-netanyahu.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²³ Adnan Abu Amer, 'Did PA receive Saudi reward for its support?', *Al-Monitor*, 27 November 2018. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/saudi-arabia-resume-aid-palestinian-authority.html#ixzz5YLCkF7nZ> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²⁴ Judy Maltz, 'Israel's Relations with Arab States Improving "Beyond Imagination", Netanyahu Tells Jewish Conference in Jerusalem', *Haaretz*, 10 June 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-relations-with-arab-states-improving-beyond-imagination-1.6163272> (accessed 6 March 2019).

over their territory', mused a former Israeli security official. 'And who got permission? Air India! it shows that the Saudis can be flexible but they cannot betray the Palestinians, not because they love them or trust them, but because it is an issue for their people and the religious establishment – and also because of their position vis-à-vis Iran.'¹²⁵ In mid-June, GIP Director Khaled bin Ali al-Humaidan reportedly joined Kushner and Trump's envoy Jason Greenblatt – as well as Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, Jordanian and Egyptian counterparts – at a meeting in Aqaba to discuss regional security.¹²⁶

Bin Salman's rising star faded dramatically in October 2018 in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Amidst international condemnation – and the constantly changing Saudi response – the Israeli government was initially silent, though it did not follow the example of Arab leaders who openly rallied to the Saudis' defence or blamed the outrage on a campaign by Turkey and Qatar. When Netanyahu eventually addressed the issue, he deplored a 'horrendous' incident, but warned that 'it is important for the stability of the world, for the region...that Saudi Arabia remains stable'.¹²⁷ Israeli commentators argued that Trump's description of Saudi Arabia as a 'steadfast ally' was inspired by his belief that the kingdom's stability was crucial for Israel as well as to the confrontation with Iran. Netanyahu's position was 'much appreciated' in Riyadh.¹²⁸ Israel's intelligence community was described as seeing great potential for cooperation with its Saudi counterparts but alarmed by MbS's recklessness.¹²⁹ 'Let's hope that if he wants to assassinate people again – say commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards – he'll consult people with some relevant experience', wrote *Yedioth Ahronoth's* Ronen Bergman.¹³⁰ One of the two officials and close aides to MbS blamed for the Khashoggi killing was reportedly the most senior Saudi to have visited Israel, underlining the very high level of the clandestine contact.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Interview, former Israeli security official.

¹²⁶ 'In Aqaba, Palestine Spymaster Plays Trump Card', *Intelligence Online*, 27 June 2018. Available at <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2018/06/27/in-aqaba-palestine-spymaster-plays-trump-card,108314911-art> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²⁷ Noa Landau and Reuters, 'Netanyahu: Events at Istanbul Consulate "Horrendous," but Saudi Stability Must Be Maintained', *Haaretz*, 2 November 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-events-at-istanbul-consulate-horrendous-1.6615648> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹²⁸ Interview, Saudi source.

¹²⁹ Interview, Israeli source.

¹³⁰ Ronan Bergman, 'The Israeli Silence' [in Hebrew], *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 23 October 2018. Available at <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5378246,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³¹ Felicia Schwartz, Margherita Stancati and Summer Said, 'Covert Saudi Outreach to Israel Sputters After Journalist's Murder', *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 December 2018. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-saudi-outreach-to-israel-sputters-after-journalists-murder-11545129001> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Overall, Saudi Arabia's strategic relationship with Israel is marked by considerable reticence. It lags behind the smaller Gulf states with regards to people-to-people contacts, refusing, for example, to allow Israelis to attend international sporting events.¹³² 'Not hosting a chess tournament with Israeli participants is a statement of our resolution for a free Palestine', commented one columnist. 'As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia bears the weight of the Muslim world and this form of commitment is necessary to ward off grand Zionist designs for the region.'¹³³ It has ignored calls from Israel for more open contacts. 'Who supported Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran? Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states,' said Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman.¹³⁴ 'So I think it's time for those moderate countries to 'come out of the closet' and start talking openly. Just like there's an axis of evil, it's time for the Middle East to also have an axis of moderate countries.' In December 2018, Netanyahu announced that he was working towards normalisation with the Saudis, fuelling speculations about a possible public meeting with MbS.¹³⁵ Shortly afterwards, it was reported that a new arrangement had been put in place to allow Israel businessmen to quietly visit the kingdom.¹³⁶ But around the same time, a secret Israeli foreign ministry report assessed that the Saudis were not prepared to go any further in developing overt relations with Israel.¹³⁷ The same point was made explicitly – and publicly – by Prince Turki al-Faisal in an unprecedented interview with an Israeli TV channel on the eve of the Warsaw summit, in February 2019.¹³⁸

¹³² Anthony Harwood, 'Saudi Arabia Loses Right to Host World Chess Championship After Barring Israeli Players', *Haaretz*, 3 December 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-saudis-stripped-of-chess-championship-after-refusal-to-admit-israeli-players-1.6717555> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³³ Tariq A. Al Maeena, 'Saudi Arabia calls Israel's bluff', *Gulf News*, 8 December 2018. Available at <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/saudi-arabia-calls-israels-bluff-1.60805086> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³⁴ Itay Blumental, 'Lieberman says Israel Hit "Almost the Entire Iranian Infrastructure in Syria"', *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 5 October 2018. Available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5256371,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³⁵ Karen Elliott House, 'Will Netanyahu Go to Riyadh?', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 January 2019. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-netanyahu-go-to-riyadh-11546804745> (accessed 6 March 2019); David Hearst, 'MBS said to be plotting Camp David-style handshake with Netanyahu', *Middle East Eye*, 13 December 2018. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/mbs-plotting-camp-david-style-handshake-netanyahu-446814831> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³⁶ Schwartz et. al., 'Covert Saudi Outreach to Israel Sputters After Journalist's Murder'.

¹³⁷ Barak Ravid, 'Israeli Report says Saudis won't back Trump Peace Plan without Concessions', *Axios*, 9 February 2019. Available at <https://www.axios.com/israel-saudi-arabia-relations-trump-peace-plan-a1a906b6-0c01-4f9b-b833-74f850181297.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹³⁸ 13 News, 'The Saudi Prince Al-Faisal for 13 News: "Netanyahu cheats the Israelis when he says that relations can be achieved with the Arab world, regardless of the Palestinians" Barak Ravid with the fourth and final chapter of the Gulf Secrets series' [in Hebrew], *Facebook*, 13 February 2019. Available at https://facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10156988011158794&id=240049663793 (accessed 6 March 2019).

Israel and Bahrain

Israel's relations with Bahrain attract less attention than those of its larger neighbour, but they have some special characteristics. The island kingdom's two-thirds Shi'a majority, the Sunni monarchy's focus on Iranian hostility and subversion, as well as the Saudi intervention to crush the 2011 uprisings, have bolstered the sense of shared interests. Bahrain's dependence on Saudi Arabia has given it a role as a launcher of trial balloons.¹³⁹ Its military ties to the US create a strong motive to cultivate a good image in Washington. Bahrain fits precisely an Israeli diplomat's assessment that his country's relations with the Gulf states are a function of fear of Iran and the Arabs' belief in Israel's influence within the US.¹⁴⁰ The presence of a small Jewish community is unique in the Gulf and has provided an interfaith route for people-to-people contacts.

Unlike Riyadh, Manama played a limited overt role in the post-Oslo period, inviting Israel's environment minister to visit in 1994. Relations with Israel subsequently developed further. In 2005, King Hamad bragged to the US ambassador about intelligence and security contacts with Israel and instructed that official statements stop referring to Israel as the 'Zionist entity'.¹⁴¹ Bahrain's Foreign Minister said there had been 'quiet, businesslike contacts with Israel for some time'. Public exposure, however, could be controversial, as when the foreign minister was criticised by Bahrain's parliament for meeting his Israeli counterpart at the UN in 2007. Still, in July 2009, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa publicly championed the API as the only means by which to mitigate a conflict that 'needlessly impoverishes Palestinians and endangers Israel's security'¹⁴² – rare and explicit recognition by an Arab state of Israel's concerns and notably just months after the latest Gaza war. In 2010, an unnamed Bahraini princess underwent medical treatment in an Israeli hospital – as, it is widely rumoured and occasionally reported, have other Gulf royals over many years.¹⁴³

Facing international criticism for discrimination and repression against the Shi'a population, the ruling Al Khalifa family have emphasised the rights of non-Muslims, including Jews. In 2008, King Hamad announced that Bahraini Jews who had emigrated to the US and Britain would be able to return home.¹⁴⁴ The appointment of a Jewish woman

¹³⁹ Hussein Ibish, 'Why Bahrain is Leading Gulf Arab Outreach to Israel', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 2 November 2017. Available at <https://agsiw.org/bahrain-leading-gulf-arab-outreach-israel/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁰ 'Israel's Relations with the Gulf States Focus on Iran'.

¹⁴¹ 'King Discusses Regional Issues with Ambassador', *WikiLeaks*, 16 February 2005. Available at https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05MANAMA230_a.html (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴² Shaikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, 'The Arab Peace Initiative for Israel and the Palestinians', *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2009. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/16/AR2009071602737.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴³ Raphael Ahren, 'Bahraini Princess had Life-Saving Surgery in Israel, Deputy Minister Says', *Times of Israel*, 8 February 2016. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bahraini-princess-undergoes-life-saving-surgery-in-israel/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁴ Ron Kampeas, 'Bahraini King Would Ease Return of Jews', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 12 November 2008. Available at <https://www.jta.org/2008/11/12/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/bahraini-king-would-ease-return-of-jews> (accessed 6 March 2019).



as ambassador to Washington attracted positive publicity as did the declaration, attributed to the King, condemning the Arab boycott of Israel and announcing that Bahraini citizens were allowed to visit the country.¹⁴⁵ However, formal trade

restrictions are still in place, as such, goods of Israeli origin or bearing Israeli trademarks are banned. In December 2017, after Trump's announcement that the US embassy would move to Jerusalem, a delegation of Bahraini political and religious figures visited the city, though the timing was reportedly coincidental.¹⁴⁶ Organised by a pro-monarchy organisation called This is Bahrain,¹⁴⁷ it was condemned by Palestinian spokespeople and by the outlawed Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, Bahrain's main opposition party. Bahrain's foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, tweeted: 'It's not helpful to pick a fight with the US over side issues while we together fight the clear and present danger of The Theo-Fascist Islamic republic'.¹⁴⁸

Like the Saudis, the UAE and Israel, Bahrain opposed the JCPoA and applauded Trump's withdrawal from it. In 2013, at the peak of the Syrian crisis, Bahrain became the first Gulf state to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organisation – illustrating its animosity to Iranian proxies.¹⁴⁹ It later announced the arrest of citizens accused of forming a local branch of Hezbollah. In May 2018, the foreign minister declared that Israel had the right to defend itself after Iranian forces in Syria fired more than a dozen missiles at Israeli targets in the occupied Golan Heights. His widely-reported comments were lauded by Israel as a show of 'historic support for the State of Israel in the face of Iranian aggression [which] reflects the new coalition being created in the Middle



¹⁴⁵ Tom Tugend, 'Bahrain King Denounces Arab Boycott of Israel, says Countrymen May Visit', *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 September 2017. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/bahrain-king-denounces-arab-boycott-of-israel-says-countrymen-may-visit-505308> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Ferziger, 'Bahrain Group Visits Israel Amid Arab Furor over Jerusalem', *Bloomberg News*, 10 December 2017. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-10/bahrain-group-visits-israel-to-demonstrate-religious-tolerance> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁷ Fahad Desmukh, 'This is Bahrain: How Right-Wing Zionists and Bahraini Royals Found Themselves in Each Other', *Bahrain Watch*, 13 December 2017. Available at <https://bahrainwatch.org/blog/2017/12/13/this-is-bahrain-how-right-wing-zionists-and-bahraini-royals-found-themselves-in-each-other/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁸ See tweet (pictured) by Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, @khalidalkhalifa, 20 December 2017. Available at <https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/943499517789216768> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁴⁹ 'Bahrain Bans Political Groups from Contacting Hezbollah', *Reuters*, 27 May 2013. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-hezbollah/bahrain-bans-political-groups-from-contacting-hezbollah-idusbre94qocr20130527> (accessed 6 March 2019).

East'. The unprecedented statement, made on Twitter, was, however, not officially published by Bahrain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁵⁰ In late 2018, soon after Netanyahu's visit to Oman, reports multiplied of an impending invitation to Manama for Israel's prime minister or even the establishment of diplomatic relations.¹⁵¹ Khalid bin Ahmed praised Netanyahu's understanding of the importance of Saudi Arabia to regional stability in the wake of the Khashoggi affair.¹⁵²



Oman and Israel

Israel's links with Oman date back to the early 1970's when it secretly supplied military advice and possibly weapons to fight the Dhofar Rebellion.¹⁵³ Its motives were similar to the clandestine support it gave Yemeni royalists fighting Egyptian-backed rebels a decade earlier. Britain brokered the initial relationship.¹⁵⁴ Oman's independent foreign policy was underlined when it refused, like Morocco and Sudan, to sever ties with Egypt after Anwar Sadat's taboo-breaking visit to Israel in 1977 and the 1979 Peace Treaty. Secret contacts continued in its wake via the Mossad.¹⁵⁵

The relationship only became public in 1994 when Muscat became the first Gulf capital to host an Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Oman's Foreign Minister attended Rabin's funeral the following year. In 1996, Israel and Oman agreed on the reciprocal opening of trade representative offices. In October 2000, when the Second Intifada began, Oman closed its office in Tel Aviv though the Israeli mission in Muscat continued to function quietly. Multilateral connections were not affected.¹⁵⁶ The Middle East Desalination Research Centre (MEDRC), devoted to water scarcity solutions, was established in Muscat

¹⁵⁰ See tweet (pictured on previous page) by Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, @khalidalkhalifa, 10 May 2018. Available at <https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/994538265029021696> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁵¹ Barak Ravid, "'Gulf Secrets': Bahrain's Secret Message to Israel was Exposed' [in Hebrew], 10 TV Israel, 10 February 2019. Available at <https://www.10.tv/news/181898> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁵² See tweet (pictured) by Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, @khalidalkhalifa, 2 November 2018. Available at <https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/1058330494578970624> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁵³ Elie Podeh, 'Israel's Renewed Affair with Oman', *The Jerusalem Post*, 8 November 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Israels-renewed-affair-with-Oman-571410> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁵⁴ Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Allies in the Middle East* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 38–9.

¹⁵⁵ Ronan Bergman, 'Mutual Interests' [in Hebrew], *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 27 October 2018. Available at <https://www.yedioth.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5381562,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁵⁶ Barak Ravid, 'Top Israeli Diplomat Holds Secret Talks in Oman', *Haaretz*, 24 November 2009. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4999781> (accessed 6 March 2019).

in 1996. Israeli experts visit it regularly but are not based there.¹⁵⁷ The Israeli representative on its council is the head of the Foreign Ministry's Middle East and peace process division.¹⁵⁸

Netanyahu's visit to Oman in October 2018¹⁵⁹ was the first declared one by an Israeli prime minister to any Arab state (other than Jordan or Egypt) at a time when there was no Israeli–Palestinian peace process – with not even any attempts at going through the motions of serious negotiation. The last US-brokered talks, overseen by John Kerry, had ended in 2014. Shortly before the visit, President Abbas also met the Sultan in Muscat, suggesting a Omani mediating role. That impression was reinforced when the Omani foreign minister went to see Abbas in Ramallah shortly afterwards. Israel's statement, however, made no mention of the Palestinians. It called the visit a 'significant step in implementing the policy outlined by Prime Minister Netanyahu to strengthen ties with the countries of the region, while leveraging Israel's advantages in security, technology and the economy.' The delegation notably included Mossad Director Cohen. 'It would not be baseless to assume that the Mossad had a hand not only in planning the trip but also in assisting Qaboos in his rule for years,' commented one Israeli analyst.¹⁶⁰ Soon afterwards Israel's transportation minister attended a Muscat conference to promote a regional railway project linking Haifa with Jordan and Saudi Arabia.



Reactions on Arabic social media reflected controversy around anything suggesting normalisation with Israel. The Twitter hashtag #عماني_ضد_التطبيع ('Omanis against normalisation', pictured left) was used to denounced the move as 'shameful' and demanded

that any contact with Israel takes place only within the framework of the API.¹⁶¹ Supporters of the BDS movement vilified Qaboos as just another Arab dictator ignoring popular sentiment. 'Our Arab brothers [...] have stabbed us in the front and the back, abandoning us politically while embracing Israel,' complained a Palestinian commentator. 'Israeli flags could soon be flying in the skies of some Gulf states, while they pressure the Palestinian leadership into accepting a "peace" deal that is unaccept-

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Omani source.

¹⁵⁸ The current holder of the position is Haim Regev. Available at <https://www.medrc.org/about-us> (accessed 15 March 2019).

¹⁵⁹ 'Israeli PM Netanyahu Makes Rare Visit to Oman', *Reuters*, 26 October 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-oman/israeli-pm-netanyahu-makes-rare-visit-to-oman-idUSKCN1No1WN> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Zvi Bar'el, 'The Sultan's New Friend: Just Why Did Netanyahu Visit Oman?', *Haaretz*, 28 October 2018. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-the-sultan-s-new-friend-just-why-did-bibi-visit-oman-1.6595856> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶¹ 'An Israeli–Omani Handshake Ignites social Networking Sites' [in Arabic], *BBC Arabic*, 27 October 2018. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-45878432> (accessed 6 March 2019).

able.’¹⁶² Netanyahu’s framing of the visit struck a familiar note: ‘We always thought that if we solved the Palestinian problem, it would open up the doors to peace with the broader Arab world,’ he said shortly before. ‘And that’s certainly true if you could do it. But it may mean that equally true, and perhaps even truer, is that if you open up to the Arab world and you normalise relations with them, it will open the door for an eventual reconciliation and peace with the Palestinians. We should do both but I think you should not underestimate the openness and the thirst in the Arab world today for Israel.’¹⁶³ The visit apparently took place with the Saudis’ agreement, since it involved flying through their airspace. Oman afterwards reiterated its support for the API.

This highly unusual visit – the first by an Israeli leader in over two decades – attracted close attention in the Gulf and beyond, but Netanyahu’s critics were not impressed, reiterating that without significant concessions to the Palestinians, relations with Arab states would continue to be limited, security-focused and largely secret. Netanyahu’s purpose, according to one, was to ‘prove that there was no basis to left-wing claims that the occupation and Israeli settlements hinder normalisation of ties with the Arab world’.¹⁶⁴

Israel and Qatar

Qatar is the odd man out in terms of Gulf links with Israel. It has simultaneously been the most open and most hostile because of its close relations with Hamas, Iran and Turkey. It played an important role in the Gaza Strip after 2012, when the Hamas leadership moved its headquarters from Damascus to Doha after criticising Bashar al-Assad’s suppression of Syria’s Arab Spring. Recently, it has become a high-profile intermediary between the Islamist movement and Israel. Its involvement appeared instrumental in preventing serious escalation in 2018. It raised its profile with the start of the Saudi and Emirati-led blockade in the summer of 2017, seeking to influence the US administration and American Jewish opinion. Its approach is pragmatic and non-ideological. ‘Qataris put their eggs in many baskets’, one senior official quipped.¹⁶⁵ ‘Qatar’s relationship with Hamas and Israel should be seen largely within the context of its wider policy of forming contacts with highly divergent groups in order to increase its clout and position as a potential mediator,’ argues Allen J. Fromherz in *Qatar: A Modern History*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Kamel Hawwash, ‘Israel has Done Nothing to Deserve Normalisation with the Arab World’, *Middle East Eye*, 12 November 2018. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-has-done-nothing-deserve-normalisation-arab-world> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶³ Tovah Lazaroff, ‘Netanyahu Makes Historical Visit to Oman’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 October 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-makes-historic-visit-to-Oman-570388> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶⁴ Akiva Eldar, ‘Israeli Celebration of Ties with Gulf States Premature’, *Al-Monitor*, 8 November 2018. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/israel-oman-united-arab-emirates-benjamin-netanyahu-judo.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶⁵ Interview, Qatari official

¹⁶⁶ Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), p. 104.

Qatar's known links with Israel began with the multilateral talks that followed the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. In 1996, it was the first GCC member state to launch trade relations with Israel. Doha distanced itself as the Israeli–Palestinian peace process stagnated, but refrained from severing relations.¹⁶⁷ Prime Minister Barak met Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, Qatar's foreign minister, at the UN in September 2000. Shimon Peres, deputy prime minister, visited Doha in January 2007. In 2008, Foreign Minister Livni gave the keynote address at the Doha Forum. Livni had been invited to the event in 2006 but cancelled because Hamas representatives were present. Characteristically for Qatar, her appearance was followed by a meeting between the Emir and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal. The formal relationship ended only in 2009 when Israel's Doha trade office was closed after the Gaza War. Undeclared contacts continued. Qatar spent hundreds of millions of dollars on rebuilding and supplying humanitarian aid to Gaza. Sheikh Hamad visited the strip in 2012 during Mohamed Morsi's presidency in Egypt and was hailed for breaking the siege, but criticised by the PA and Israel for legitimising Hamas and perpetuating the split with the PLO.¹⁶⁸ 'With Qatar there is a question mark because on the one hand they have been helpful with Gaza's economic recovery, probably the most generous of the Gulf states, but they host some of the worst terrorist organisations in the Middle East,' said a senior Israeli source.¹⁶⁹ In 2013, Qatar secured Arab League agreement to modify the API to include the concept of land swaps – moving away from the unqualified demand of a return to the 1967 borders.

After the 2014 Gaza war, Doha established the Qatari Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza. Its chairman Mohammed al-Emadi visited Israel regularly since then, developing a good relationship with his Israeli counterpart, Yoav Mordechai, head of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT).¹⁷⁰ During an early trip, Emadi secured Israeli agreement to allow concrete into Gaza after it was banned because it was used to construct tunnels for Hamas.¹⁷¹ Even with reconstruction efforts, conditions in the Strip continued to deteriorate. US cuts in funding to UNRWA, the UN Reliefs and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, worsened an already dire situation.¹⁷²

Emadi is described by Israeli media as 'Qatar's de facto ambassador to Israel' and his Gaza

¹⁶⁷ Uzi Rabi, 'Qatar's Relations with Israel: Challenging Arab and Gulf Norms', *Middle East Journal* 63/ 3, Summer 2009, pp. 443–59.

¹⁶⁸ Ian Black and Harriet Sherwood, 'Qatari Emir's Visit to Gaza is a Boost for Hamas', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2012. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/23/qatari-emir-welcome-gaza-visit> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁶⁹ Interview, senior Israeli source.

¹⁷⁰ Simon Henderson, 'Qatar's Architect of a New Life for Gazans', *The Hill*, 11 May 2018. Available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/414883-qatars-architect-of-a-new-life-for-gazans> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷¹ Elior Levy, 'Israel and Qatar Discuss Gaza Reconstruction', *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 12 March 2015. Available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4636296,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷² 'UN Says Gaza Situation "catastrophic" amid Deepening Aid Cuts', *The Times of Israel*, 12 September 2018. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-says-gaza-situation-catastrophic-amid-deepening-aid-cuts/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

City office as the ‘nerve centre of the Israeli defence establishment in the Gaza Strip’.¹⁷³ He was involved in efforts to secure the release of two IDF soldiers and the return of the remains of two others.¹⁷⁴ His activities became increasingly visible after the Saudi-led blockade, along with a campaign to welcome prominent American Jewish figures to Doha for meetings with the Emir. These included Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz and Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America. Dershowitz called Qatar ‘the Israel of the Gulf states’. Klein revealed that Qatari officials promised not to run an *Al Jazeera* documentary critical of Israel’s supporters in the US.¹⁷⁵ Doha ordered the expulsion of members of Hamas’s military wing, including one linked to efforts to establish cells in the West Bank.¹⁷⁶

In the summer of 2018, Lieberman met Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani amid efforts to hammer out a ceasefire with Hamas, though the Israeli side initially maintained secrecy to avoid embarrassing Egypt. Qatar’s influence reached its peak in November 2018 when it delivered the first of six \$25 million tranches (to be issued monthly) to pay 37,000 Gazan public employees and 50,000 needy families – as well as buying fuel to boost electricity generation.¹⁷⁷ Recipients were vetted by Israel’s Shin Bet security service to ensure they were not Hamas security personnel.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Netanyahu was accused of supporting Hamas and the Qataris faced criticism for collaborating with Israel. ‘While Qatar is continuing its tradition of aiding the Hamas regime, it is also helping Israel avoid another war’, commented one Israeli expert. ‘In that way, everyone benefits from the wealth and munificence of the tiny emirate’.¹⁷⁹ Shortly afterwards, Israel’s ambassador to the US issued a remarkable public statement thanking Qatar, along with Egypt and the UN, for their efforts to improve the situation in Gaza – reportedly in response to a Qatari demand.¹⁸⁰ Doha responded by describing itself as working ‘hand-

¹⁷³ ‘Ya’alon Counts on the Qatari Envoy for Solving Hamas Tunnel Problem’, *DEBKAF*, 9 February 2016. Available at <https://www.debka.com/yaalon-counts-on-the-qatari-envoy-for-solving-hamas-tunnel-problem/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷⁴ Avi Issacharoff, ‘“Excellent Relations with Israel”: An Exclusive Interview with the Qatari Mediator between Israel and Hamas’ [in Hebrew], *Walla News*, 12 February 2017. Available at <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3039700> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷⁵ Seth J. Frantzman, ‘How Qatar’s Jewish Strategy Backfired’, *The Jerusalem Post*, 21 June 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/How-Qatars-Jewish-strategy-backfired-560586> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷⁶ Elinor Levy, ‘Two Senior Hamas Officials Forced to Leave Qatar’, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 6 May 2017. Available at <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4971577,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷⁷ Stuart Winer, ‘Qatar gave over \$1.1 billion to Gaza Strip from 2012-18, ministers told’, *Times of Israel*, 11 February 2019. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatar-gave-over-1-1-billion-to-gaza-strip-over-six-years-report/> (accessed 15 March 2019).

¹⁷⁸ Elinor Levy, ‘This is how the Cash Flow Mechanism Operates from Qatar to Gaza’ [in Hebrew], *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 6 December 2018. Available at <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5421255,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁷⁹ Shlomi Eldar, ‘How Gaza Brings Israel, Qatar Closer’, *Al-Monitor*, 11 October 2018. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/israel-qatar-iran-hamas-avigdor-liberman-jason-greenblatt.html#ixzz5YQXESriY> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁰ Tal Shalev, ‘The Qatari Demand and the Chirping of the Ambassador: Behind the Scenes of Transferring Money to Hamas’ [in Hebrew], *Walla News*, 6 December 2018. Available at <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3205329> (accessed 6 March 2019).

in-hand' with Israel and the UN. 'The Qataris want their own relationship with Israel but anyone else who does that is subject to accusations of treachery,' complained a former Saudi official.¹⁸¹

Qatar, despite its differences with the UAE and Bahrain, has also encouraged people-to-people contact, allowing Israeli athletes to take part in international competitions, including the 2022 World Cup.



Kuwait and Israel

Kuwait deviates from the GCC pattern of increasingly close and visible ties and convergence of strategic views with Israel. Arab nationalism, a sometimes assertive national assembly, an older leader, less dominant state security structures and a history of sympathy with the Palestinians are all factors. Little evidence is available about discreet, let alone clandestine connections such as those that exist with all other Gulf states. In 2014, Lieberman said secret talks were under way with Kuwait, which the Gulf state immediately denied.¹⁸²

Individual Kuwaitis occasionally call for normal relations with Israel.¹⁸³ However, opposition to normalisation is far more common, at least on social media.¹⁸⁴ Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah declared in January 2019 that his country has no intention of normalising ties with Israel. 'All "voices" calling for normalisation', he added, 'were "individual voices" and did not represent the official Kuwaiti stance.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Interview, former Saudi official.

¹⁸² Dan Williams, 'Israel Says Close to Forging New Ties across Arab World', *Reuters*, 14 April 2014. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-arab-ties/israel-says-close-to-forging-new-ties-across-arab-world-idUSBREA3DoTE20140414> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸³ 'In Israel TV Interview, Kuwaiti TV Host Calls for Ties, Shrugs off Death Threats', *Times of Israel*, 9 January 2019. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-israel-interview-kuwaiti-tv-host-stands-by-call-for-ties-with-jewish-state/> (accessed 6 March 2019); 'Citing Quran, Kuwaiti Pundit says Israel "A Legitimate State," not an Occupier', *Times of Israel*, 22 November 2017. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/kuwaiti-pundit-says-israel-a-legitimate-state-not-an-occupier/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁴ See tweet (pictured) by Al Jazeera Arabic, @AJArabic, 3 February 2018. Available at <https://twitter.com/AJArabic/status/959588505293860866> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁵ 'Official: Kuwait has no Intention to Normalise Relations with Israel', *Middle East Monitor*, 21 January 2019. Available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190121-official-kuwait-has-no-intention-to-normalise-relations-with-israel/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Hostility to Israel is evident in both Kuwait's domestic political discourse and its diplomacy.¹⁸⁶ In October 2017 the speaker of the national assembly won widespread approval when he shouted 'child killers' at Israeli MPs who were taking part in the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly in Saint Petersburg.¹⁸⁷ Kuwait has refused to attend regional events in which Israel is participating, such as the 2014 World Future Energy Summit in Abu Dhabi. 'The decision comes in line with Kuwait's commitment to boycott all forms of interaction with the Zionist regime', the energy ministry said.¹⁸⁸ It has announced plans to open an embassy in the occupied Palestinian territory.¹⁸⁹ In December 2018, at the UN Security Council, Kuwait accused Israel of exaggerating the danger posed by tunnels dug by Hezbollah – treated by other GCC states as a terrorist organisation.¹⁹⁰ It regularly champions the Palestinian cause and highlights Israeli human rights violations in international fora,¹⁹¹ furthermore banning Israeli citizens from using its national airline.¹⁹² The irony is that in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of 1990, Kuwait expelled 300,000 Palestinians because of the PLO's support for Saddam Hussein. It took many years before Kuwaiti–Palestinian relations recovered.

Kuwait did not join the Saudis, Emiratis and Bahrainis (and Israelis) in greeting Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA. It has also tried to mediate in the dispute between Qatar and the rest of the GCC states.¹⁹³

One curiosity is the Kuwait-based online Arabic news site, *Al-Jarida*, which has acquired the reputation of being used to leak news and/or misinformation from Israeli and other sources. In January 2019, it reported that the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary

¹⁸⁶ Giorgio Cafiero, 'Kuwait Breaks from GCC on Warming up to Israel', *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2019. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/kuwait-break-gcc-warming-israel-palestine-saudi-trump.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁷ Stuart Winer and Raphael Ahren, 'Israeli Lawmakers Walk out of Summit amid Anti-Israel Onslaught', *Times of Israel*, 19 October 2017. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-lawmakers-walk-out-of-summit-over-anti-israel-onslaught/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁸ 'Kuwait Boycotts UAE Energy Event over Israeli Presence', *Arabian Business*, 19 January 2014. Available at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/kuwait-boycotts-uae-energy-event-over-israeli-presence-535234.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁸⁹ Naser Al Wasmi, 'Kuwait Rejects Israeli Occupation, Considers Opening Embassy in Palestine', *The National*, 22 January 2018. Available at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/kuwait-rejects-israeli-occupation-considers-opening-embassy-in-palestine-1.697702> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹⁰ 'Kuwait at UNSC: Israel is Exaggerating the Danger from Hezbollah Tunnels', *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 December 2018. Available at <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Kuwait-at-UNSC-Israel-is-exaggerating-the-danger-from-Hezbollah-tunnels-574807> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹¹ 'Kuwait Renews Support for Palestinian Legitimate Political Rights', *Kuwait News Agency*, 23 January 2019. Available at <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2772302&language=en> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹² 'MP Asks about Kuwait Airways Settlement made with an Israeli – DGCA Warns Wataniya Airways', *Arab Times*, 27 August 2018. Available at <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/mp-asks-about-kuwait-airways-settlement-made-with-an-israeli-dgca-warns-wataniya-airways/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹³ Hamad H. Albloshi, 'Kuwait's Careful Balancing Act with Iran, Saudi Arabia', *Al-Monitor*, 24 May 2018. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/iran-jcpoa-nuclear-deal-gcc-saudi-kuwait-reaction-division.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

Guards' elite 'Quds Force', Qasem Soleimani, had warned that Netanyahu would seek to escalate tensions along the Israeli–Syrian border in order to boost his popularity in the 2019 elections.¹⁹⁴ Netanyahu responded to the *Al-Jarida* story by warning Soleimani to examine 'the state of Iranian bases he is trying to establish in Syria' instead of 'interfering in the [Israeli] elections'.¹⁹⁵ Israelis accused him of having planted the story to bolster his security credentials.¹⁹⁶



Conclusion

Israel's deepening security and commercial ties with the Gulf states reflect regional and generational changes. The rise of Iran, the post-Arab Spring confidence of autocratic regimes, a growing sense of US disengagement and Palestinian divisions have all contributed to their converging interests – and the increasing though still partial visibility of long-secret links. Trump's confrontational approach to Iran may have the potential to translate these ties into something more ambitious. Alternatively, the Middle Eastern actors may decide that an inconsistent and impulsive US president is not prepared to do enough to challenge or contain Tehran, and thus act independently. Omani and Qatari motives differ but also reflect the pragmatic acceptance of Israel as an unassailable regional power. Kuwait is conspicuously alone in resisting the trend.

Israel sees ties with the Gulf as an important way of demonstrating its value to Washington – as well as downplaying the importance of the Palestinian issue. 'It is doubtful whether the scope of [US] aid to Arab countries could have been sustained without the support of AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobby group) and Jewish organisations', noted Eran Lerman, former Deputy Head of Israel's National Security Council. 'Arab leaders, including the Saudi heir to the throne and even the Emir of Qatar, reflect this insight when they systematically invest in keeping open channels of dialogue with leaders of US Jewry.'¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Farzad Qasimi, 'Soleimani's Visit to Southern Syria Ignited the Front between Israel and Iran' [in Arabic], *Al-Jarida*, 23 January 2019. Available at <http://www.aljarida.com/articles/1548177185287552600/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹⁵ 'Netanyahu Mocks Top Iranian General: "Look at the State of your Bases in Syria"', *Times of Israel*, 23 January 2019. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-mocks-top-iranian-general-look-at-the-state-of-your-bases-in-syria/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹⁶ See tweet (pictured) by Zahava Galon, @zehavagalon, 24 January 2019. Available at <https://twitter.com/zehavagalon/status/1088233910847328262> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹⁷ Eran Lerman, 'Not Necessarily "A People that Dwells Alone"', *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, 24 May 2018. Available at <https://jiss.org.il/en/lerman-not-necessarily-people-dwells-alone/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

If the UAE has been the most forward in developing links with Israel, Saudi Arabia is the key to wider change. Yet the kingdom, more than its neighbours, faces constraints in terms of domestic, regional and Muslim public opinion – largely because of the legitimacy claimed by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. It is important to note that no GCC state has publicly retreated from the API, which requires the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the territories occupied in 1967. That is not compatible with Netanyahu's insistence that the most he will countenance is a 'state-minus' and his parallel refusal to dismantle illegal settlements. The 2018 Al-Quds Summit reiterated the long-standing Saudi position. In December 2018, the Saudis voted against a US-sponsored UN resolution condemning Hamas in Gaza, explaining that it would undermine 'the two-state solution which we aspire to'.¹⁹⁸ All Arab states followed suit.

Nevertheless, Palestinian concern is growing because of multiplying signs of improving Israeli ties with the Gulf (and with Sudan and Chad). Nabil Shaath, a former PA foreign minister and adviser to Abbas, has publicly questioned the commitment of the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to reject normalisation with Israel.¹⁹⁹ PLO Secretary General Saeb Erekat has warned of a 'stab in the back' by Arab states.²⁰⁰ In the occupied Palestinian territories, 72 percent believe an alliance already exists between the Sunni states and Israel against Iran.²⁰¹

Israel has developed greater awareness of the regional context of its conflict with the Palestinians. The last full-scale war involving an Arab state was in 1973. Prospects for an agreement with the Palestinians have been declining since the Second Intifada and the Lebanon War of 2006 reflected the changing Middle Eastern strategic environment. On the other hand, the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the shift to the right in Israel and the debilitating political and geographic split between the PLO and Hamas for over a decade have reinforced the sense on both sides that there is no 'partner' for peace.

Polling in 2018 found 49 percent of Israelis believe Netanyahu's argument that it is possible to achieve normalisation with Arab states without a peace agreement with the Palestinians; 33 percent do not accept this.²⁰² Political opponents, including prominent veterans of Israel's defence and security establishment, have repeatedly questioned Netanyahu's

¹⁹⁸ 'Saudi Arabia's UN Ambassador Speaks out against Hamas Resolution', *Arab News*, 7 December 2018. Available at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1417336/saudi-arabia> (accessed 6 March 2019).

¹⁹⁹ 'Palestinians said scrambling for support as Arab, Muslim world warms to Israel', *Times of Israel*, 27 November 2018. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-said-scrambling-as-israel-warms-up-to-arab-muslim-world/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁰⁰ 'Erekat Criticises Bahrain and Activists in Gaza Describe their Foreign Minister as the Patron of Selling Jerusalem' [in Arabic], *Al-Jazeera*, 21 December 2018. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2018/12/21/عريقات-البحرين-أسترااليا-القدس-إسرائيل> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁰¹ 'Public Opinion Poll', *Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research* 70, 18 December 2018. Available at <http://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2070%20English%20press%20release%20Dec%202018.pdf> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁰² 'The 2018 Foreign Policy Index'.

approach, pointing out that it will not succeed without concessions to the Palestinians. Tamir Pardo, Mossad Director from 2011–15, insists that secret links will not legitimise Israel.²⁰³ Alliances based on common threats can collapse if those threats recede or new positions emerge – for example a Saudi rapprochement with Iran or Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank.

Broadly speaking, expectations on both sides are that links between Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states will continue to grow in the medium term, but without the establishment of overt diplomatic relations, normal trade nor the opening of embassies. For that to happen, tangible progress still needs to be made towards resolving the Palestinian question. In the Gulf, ruled by modernising hereditary autocracies which prioritise national interests over pan-Arab solidarity, Palestine may no longer be the central issue that it was once perceived to be – though it remains one with a wide popular and emotional resonance that is unlikely to be simply ignored.²⁰⁴

*The sources for this paper include interviews with serving and former government officials, politicians, businessmen, journalists and experts from Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Egypt, the occupied Palestinian Territories, the US and the UK. Most were conducted in the summer and autumn of 2018. Unless named, the sources requested anonymity.

²⁰³ Libby Zipser, 'Regional Security Lobby – Making Regional Peace Safe' [in Hebrew], *YouTube*, 16 March 2017. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1uzPzKK4Lg/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

²⁰⁴ '2017–2018 Arab Opinion Index: Executive Summary', *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 10 July 2018. Available at <http://arabcenterdc.org/survey/2017-2018-arab-opinion-index-executive-summary/> (accessed 6 March 2019).

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