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Samuel Ramani

[Jerusalem Post](#), Dec. 26, 2017

On November 19, Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz announced that the Israeli government possessed covert diplomatic links with Saudi Arabia. As Israel's economic and defense links with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been an open secret for years, Steinitz's announcement was unsurprising. Nevertheless, his statement was symbolically significant as it broke the decades-long veil of secrecy surrounding the Israel-GCC partnership.

Many analysts have described the Israel-GCC partnership as a purely tactical alignment aimed at containing Iran and expanding Israel's formal diplomatic recognition in the Arab world. This depiction mischaracterizes and understates the depth of the partnership. Israel established security and economic ties with the GCC bloc long before Iran emerged as a mutual threat, and this informal partnership will likely continue to strengthen even if Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not give Israel diplomatic recognition. The current Israel-GCC security partnership emerged from a common desire to confront sources of instability in the Middle East. The first major example of a joint Israel-GCC stabilization effort was Israel's 1981 Operation Opera strike on Iraq's nuclear facilities. This military strike was likely undertaken with Saudi Arabia's tacit consent, as Israeli pilots flew over Saudi airspace to Iraq without active resistance from Riyadh.

Iran's rising military assertiveness after the 2003 Iraq War and pursuit of a nuclear deterrent further entrenched the pro-stability agenda that binds Israel to Saudi Arabia. Despite denials from Israeli and Saudi officials, numerous reports pointed to an increase in Jerusalem-Riyadh intelligence cooperation during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure as Iran's president. This cooperation culminated in an alleged 2009 test of Saudi Arabia's air defense capacity and a covert 2010 assessment of the ability of Israeli planes to pass safely through Saudi territory to Iran in the event of war.

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Recent military activities like Israel's joint air force drills with the UAE in March 2017 build directly on Ahmadinejad-era intelligence sharing, and highlight the persistence of the Israel-GCC stabilizing coalition. The Qatar crisis represents the natural extension of this coalition, as Israel and Saudi Arabia both regard Qatar's financial support for Islamist groups as threatening to regional stability. Al Jazeera's journalism license underscored Jerusalem's solidarity with Saudi Arabia against Qatar. Israel and Saudi Arabia's clandestine collaboration to undermine Qatar's influence in the Middle East demonstrates that the stabilization role served by their alignment is likely to survive even if Iran eventually moderates its belligerent conduct.

The economic dimension of the Israel-GCC partnership has equally deep roots. During the 1990s, Israeli investors expressed interest in developing economic ties with GCC countries, due to their rapidly growing financial sectors and real estate markets. Pressure from Israeli investors and GCC business owners who were interested in gaining access to Israeli capital and technology resulted in the development of state-to-state trade relations. Israel's landmark 1996 agreement to open trade offices in Oman and Qatar began this process. This agreement was followed by Saudi Arabia's decision to legalize Israeli capital inflows in 2005.

Even though disagreements over the status of the Palestinian territories abruptly halted Israel's outreach efforts to Oman and Qatar during the early 2000s, Israel's informal trade relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have grown rapidly over the past decade. Through trade liberalization initiatives, Saudi Arabia has gained access to Israeli irrigation technology. The UAE's fledgling renewable energy sector and real estate markets have also received substantial capital inflows from Israel. The development of person-to-person links between Israel and the GCC through trade initiatives has encouraged the development of informal defense sector cooperation. In 2016, Saudi Arabia began purchasing Israeli drones via South Africa. An October 2017 report revealed that the UAE has a long-standing partnership with Israeli businessman Metai Kokhafi, which has allowed Abu Dhabi to gain access to Iron Dome technology.

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Despite these positive developments and Bahrain’s recent expression of support for Israel’s recognition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are unlikely to establish formal ties with Israel. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir continues to deny the existence of informal cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Officially, Saudi diplomats also continue to adhere to the terms of the 2002 Abdullah Plan, which only allowed for the recognition of Israel if a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict was successfully implemented...

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US-SAUDI NUCLEAR TALKS: A MIDDLE EAST BAROMETER?

Dr. James M. Dorsey

[BESA](#), Jan. 10, 2017

President Donald Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was perhaps most challenging for the Saudis, who, as custodians of Islam’s two holiest cities, would have been expected to play a leading role in protecting the status of the city that is home to the faith’s third holiest site. Yet Saudi Arabia sent its foreign minister, Adel al Jubeir, to the summit of Islamic countries in Istanbul that recognized East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine rather than the king, the crown prince, or another senior member of the ruling family.

The difficulty for the Saudis is not only their close cooperation with Israel, their willingness to hint in public at what was long a secret relationship, and their

position as the closest friend the US has in the Arab world - a friend who reportedly was willing to endorse a US Israeli-Palestinian peace plan in the making that would fail to meet the minimum demanded by Palestinians and Arab public opinion.

With Trump backing Saudi efforts to counter Iranian influence in a swath of land stretching from Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa despite mounting US criticism of the kingdom's conduct of its military intervention in Yemen, Riyadh has a vested interest in maintaining its close ties to Washington. While Riyadh has been put in an awkward position by Trump's declaration, international condemnation of the move has also increased Saudi leverage.

Trump's support for Saudi Arabia as well as his transactional approach to foreign policy, which aims to further US business interests, holds out the promise of tipping the Middle East's military balance of power in favor of the kingdom. In the president's latest effort, his administration is weighing allowing Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium as part of a deal that would ensure that bids by Westinghouse Electric Co. and other US companies to build nuclear reactors in the kingdom are successful. Past US reluctance to endorse Saudi enrichment and reprocessing of uranium has put purveyors of US nuclear technology at a disadvantage.

Saudi Arabia agreed with the US in 2008 not to pursue enrichment and reprocessing but has since backed away from that pledge. "They wouldn't commit, and it was a sticking point," said Max Bergmann, a former special assistant to the undersecretary of state for arms control and international security. Testifying to Congress in November, Christopher Ford, the US National Security Council's senior director for weapons of mass destruction and counterproliferation, refused to commit the Trump administration to the US restrictions. The restrictions are "not a legal requirement. It is a desired outcome," Ford said. He added that the 2015 international agreement with Iran, which severely restricts the Islamic Republic's nuclear program for at least a decade, made it more difficult for the US to insist on limiting other countries' enrichment capabilities.

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Saudi Arabia plans to construct 16 nuclear power reactors by 2030 at a cost of an estimated \$100 billion. Officially, Saudi Arabia sees nuclear power as a way of freeing up more oil for export in a country that has witnessed dramatic increases in domestic consumption, as well as contributing to the diversification of its economy. It would also enhance the kingdom's efforts to ensure parity with Iran in terms of its ability to enrich uranium and its quest to be the Middle East's long-term, dominant power. Saudi Arabia has large uranium deposits of its own. In preparation for requesting bids for its nuclear program, Saudi Arabia in October asked the US, France, South Korea, Russia, and China for preliminary information. In recent years, the kingdom has concluded a number of nuclear-related understandings not only with the US but with China, France, Pakistan, Russia, South Korea, and Argentina.

Trump's apparent willingness to ease US restrictions services his campaign promise to revive and revitalize America's nuclear industry and meet competition from Russia and China. Saudi contracts are crucial for Westinghouse, a nuclear technology pioneer whose expertise is used in more than half the world's nuclear power plants. Westinghouse declared bankruptcy in March because of delays in two US projects. A deal that would lift US restrictions in return for acquiring US technology could enmesh Saudi Arabia in bitter domestic political battles in Washington revolving around alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election. Controversial Trump campaign aide and short-lived national security advisor Michael Flynn sought to convince Israel to accept the kingdom's nuclear program as part of his efforts to promote Russian nuclear interests in the Middle East.

Trump's willingness, against the backdrop of uncertainty about his readiness to uphold US adherence to the 2015 agreement with Iran, could unleash an arms race in the Middle East and North Africa. Trump recently refused to certify to Congress that Iran was compliant with the agreement. Dropping restrictions on Saudi enrichment could not only fuel the Saudi-Iranian rivalry that has wreaked havoc across the region, but also encourage other recipients of US nuclear technology to demand similar rights. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt have accepted

restrictions on enrichment in their nuclear deals with US companies as long as those limitations were imposed on all countries in the Middle East...

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YEMEN'S HUMANITARIAN NIGHTMARE

Asher Orkaby

[Foreign Affairs](#), Dec. 2017

On February 20, 2015, as the residents of Sanaa prepared for evening prayers, Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi put on a woman's niqab and slipped out the back door of his official residence, where a car was waiting for him. For a month, Houthi rebels, who had taken Sanaa in late 2014, had been holding him under house arrest. By the time the guards noticed that he was gone, Hadi had reached the relative safety of the southern port of Aden. A month later, as Houthi forces advanced south, he fled again, this time to Riyadh, where he called on Saudi Arabia to intervene in Yemen's civil war.

Within days, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states began a campaign of air strikes against Houthi targets that rapidly became a siege of the entire country. Cut off from imports, and under a ceaseless Saudi bombardment, Yemen has turned into one of the worst humanitarian crises of modern times. Seven million Yemenis live in areas that are close to famine, nearly two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition, and an outbreak of cholera has infected over 600,000 people.

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The conflict in Yemen is often described as an outgrowth of the Shiite-Sunni rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as Iran has supplied weapons and military advisers to the Houthis. But this misunderstands both the origins of the war and the reason why Saudi Arabia intervened. The war is not about regional interests; it is a continuation of a long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and marginalized northern tribes, which escalated thanks to a gradual decline in the legitimacy and competence of the central government in Sanaa. And Saudi Arabia intervened not to counter Iranian expansionism but to secure its southern border against the Houthi threat. As a result, only an internal Yemeni political settlement can end the war, although Saudi Arabia, the United States, and international humanitarian organizations can do much to improve the situation in the meantime.

The modern state of Yemen was born in 1962, when revolutionaries, many of whom had absorbed contemporary ideas of nationalism at foreign universities, deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr and created the Yemen Arab Republic, or North Yemen. For the next 40 years, the foreign-educated elite who had sparked the revolution occupied some of the most important positions in the new republic, serving as presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, and chief executives. They based their legitimacy on the roles they had played during the revolution and its aftermath, achieving an almost mythic status in the national imagination. The revolution also transformed the rest of Yemeni society. It empowered Yemen's growing urban population and ended the dominance of those families—known as "sayyids"—who could trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. And it sent Yemen's northern tribes, which had supported the deposed Badr, into the political wilderness. Shut off from government funding, their region stagnated and their problems festered.

After North and South Yemen unified, in 1990, discrimination against the northern tribes gave rise to a protest movement in the north, led in part by the Houthi family, one of the most prominent sayyid dynasties in northern Yemen. Then, in 2004, during early clashes between northern tribes and the government, the Yemeni military killed Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, one of the leaders of the movement. His death marked the beginning of the northern tribes' armed insurgency and gave the rebels their name. For the next seven years, sporadic fighting continued, with neither side gaining a meaningful advantage.

At the same time as the government was fighting the Houthis in the north, its authority in the rest of the country was fading. The greatest challenge for a revolutionary state is maintaining its legitimacy after the founders have died, and half a century after the revolution, few of Yemen's original leaders remained. In June 2011, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, one of the last of the revolutionary generation, was mortally wounded in an assassination attempt on the country's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, during popular protests that had paralyzed Sanaa. Both sides of the political divide paused the hostilities to mourn. But from that point on, the Yemeni state created by the revolution effectively disappeared.

The passing of Yemen's revolutionary generation created not only a crisis of national identity but also one of governance. Once, Yemeni students who had obtained degrees abroad took pride in returning home as future leaders. But over the last ten years, much of the educated elite has left the country, citing worsening government corruption and ineptitude and a lack of domestic employment opportunities. Political appointments are now granted on the basis of tribal membership rather than training or experience, and technocrats have gradually given way to the beneficiaries of nepotism.

As the central government's legitimacy declined over the last decade, a political void opened. Beginning in 2009, extremist groups, including al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, emerged to fill the gap. But it was the northern Houthi movement, already organized and opposed to the central government, that was positioned to take the fullest advantage of the derelict republic.

The Houthis' chance came in early 2011, when revolts in places such as Egypt and Tunisia inspired months of mass protests against the corrupt, autocratic government in Sanaa. That February, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, a northern rebel leader, declared his support for the antigovernment demonstrations and sent thousands of his followers to join the rallies in the capital. Some of the most powerful images of the uprising were those of tribesmen in traditional robes

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demonstrating alongside members of the urban youth movement. Fifty years earlier, these two groups had fought each other for control of Yemen; in 2011, they marched together against a common enemy, Saleh...

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TINY, WEALTHY QATAR GOES ITS OWN WAY, AND PAYS FOR IT

Declan Walsh

[New York Times](#), Jan. 22, 2018

For the emir of Qatar, there has been little that money can't buy. As a teenager he dreamed of becoming the Boris Becker of the Arab world, so his parents flew the German tennis star to Qatar to give their son lessons. A lifelong sports fanatic, he later bought a French soccer team, Paris Saint-Germain, which last summer paid \$263 million for a Brazilian striker — the highest transfer fee in the history of the game. He helped bring the 2022 World Cup to Qatar at an estimated cost of \$200 billion, a major coup for a country that had never qualified for the tournament.

Now at age 37, the emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, has run into a problem that money alone cannot solve. Since June, tiny Qatar has been the target of a punishing air and sea boycott led by its largest neighbors, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Overnight, airplanes and cargo ships bound for Qatar were forced to change course, diplomatic ties were severed and Qatar's only land border, a 40-mile stretch of desert with Saudi Arabia, slammed shut.

Not even animals were spared. Around 12,000 Qatari camels, peacefully grazing on Saudi land, were expelled, causing a stampede at the border. Qatar’s foes accuse it of financing terrorism, cozying up to Iran and harboring fugitive dissidents. They detest Al Jazeera, Qatar’s rambunctious and highly influential satellite network. And – although few say it openly – they appear intent on ousting Qatar’s young leader, Tamim, from his throne. Tamim denies the accusations, and chalks up the animosity to simple jealousy. “They don’t like our independence,” he said in an interview in New York in September. “They see it as a threat.”

The boycott turned out to be the first strike of a sweeping campaign by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, that has electrified the Middle East. Obsessed with remaking his hidebound country and curbing the regional ambitions of its nemesis, Iran, the young, hard-charging Saudi has imprisoned hundreds of rivals at a five-star hotel in Riyadh, strong-armed the prime minister of Lebanon in a failed stab at Iran and stepped up his devastating war in Yemen.

The Saudi prince has shaped the Trump administration’s approach to the Middle East and his endeavors could have far-reaching consequences, potentially driving up energy prices, upending Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and raising the chances of war with Iran. The Qatar dispute is perhaps the least understood piece of the action, but it has a particularly nasty edge. In September, at a normally soporific meeting of the Arab League in Cairo, Saudi and Qatari diplomats exchanged barbed epithets like “rabid dog” and heated accusations of treachery and even cruelty to camels. “When I speak, you shut up!” yelled Qatar’s minister of state for foreign affairs, Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi. “No, you are the one who should shut up!” his Saudi counterpart shouted back.

The highly personalized rancor has the unmistakable air of a family feud. Qataris, Saudis and Emiratis stem from the same nomadic tribes, share the same religion and eat the same food. So their dispute has shades of quarreling cousins, albeit ones armed with billions of dollars and American warplanes. The crisis took an

alarming turn last week when the Emirates accused Qatar's warplanes of harassing two Emirati passenger airliners as they crossed the Gulf. Untrue, said Qatar, which fired back with its own accusation that Emirati warplanes had already breached its airspace twice.

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[Arbor Day \(Tu Bishvat\) Guide for the Perplexed, 2018: Yoram Ettinger, *Ettinger Report*, Jan. 29, 2018](#)— 1. Judaism stipulates four New Years, one of them is the New Year for the trees, Arbor Day, (Tu Bishvat in Hebrew), the 15th day of the month of Shvat (January 31, 2018). The zodiac of Shvat is Aquarius - the water carrier (bucket in Hebrew). Tu Bishvat highlights the rejuvenation and blooming of trees and the Jewish people. According to Rashi, the leading Jewish Biblical commentator, this date was determined because most of the winter rains are over by Tu Bishvat, sap starts to rise and fruit begins to ripen. Israel's Legislature, the Knesset, was established on Tu Bishvat, 1949.

[Yemen Separatists Capture Aden, Government Confined to Palace: Residents: *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2018](#)—Southern Yemeni separatists took control of the port city of Aden after two days of fighting, residents said on Tuesday, confining the internationally recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi to the presidential palace.

[A Changed Saudi Arabia \(Video\): Amb. Dore Gold, *JCPA*, Jan. 3, 2018](#)—I get asked all the time, "You wrote a book, we seem to remember, about Saudi Arabia's contribution to the rise of global terrorism after 9/11. Yet you are now associated with the effort of the State of Israel and others to bring Saudi Arabia into the tent and to create a kind of new relationship - perhaps a reconciliation - between the Jewish state and the Saudi Kingdom. How do you explain that? Isn't that an inconsistency."

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[Like Israelis, Saudis Pin Their Hopes on Iranian Protestors: Ben Lynfield, Jerusalem Post, Jan. 3, 2018](#)—Tehran on Tuesday ratcheted up its accusations against Saudi Arabia for allegedly stoking the unrest in Iran and vowed there would be strong punishment against Riyadh. Meanwhile, Saudi media praised the protesters and voiced hope the unrest would force Iran to scale down its regional involvements in Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, which the Saudis view as a grave threat.