



Strange bedfellows in West Asia

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Strange bedfellows in West Asia-Tel Aviv believes that improved relations with Riyadh will serve many major strategic goals

- Increasing intimacy between Saudi Arabia, the so-called bastion of Islamic orthodoxy, and Israel, the Jewish state carved out by the colonial powers in Arab Palestine, appears astonishing at first sight.

Complex reasons

- The enemy is Iran, which both countries perceive as the primary threat to their strategic interests in West Asia.
- Saudi Arabia is engaged in a fierce competition with Iran for influence in the Persian Gulf and wider West Asia.
- Riyadh seems to be losing this competition as demonstrated by recent events in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as well as tiny Qatar's defiant attitude.
- Iran is a potential challenger to Israel's nuclear monopoly in West Asia and uses its influence in the Levant to impede Israeli dominance of the region.
- But equally important, the Israeli government believes that improved relations with Riyadh will serve other major goals.
- First, Saudi Arabia's lead in establishing relations with Israel, even if covert, is likely to induce other Arab states, especially the oil rich monarchies of the Gulf, to open their economies to Israeli investment and technical expertise, thus bringing Israel substantial economic benefits.
- Israel's success in achieving this objective is critically dependent upon developing a significant, even if unacknowledged, relationship with Saudi Arabia.
- Second, the Israeli government estimates that improved relations with the Saudi regime, the "guardian" of Islam's two holiest sites, will help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Tel Aviv's satisfaction.
- This means Israel continuing to control the entire territory between the

River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea without giving the Palestinians any civil or political rights.

- Israel feels that with Saudi help, the status quo could be made acceptable to other Arab and Muslim countries as well since several of them, such as Egypt and Pakistan, are heavily dependent upon Saudi largesse.
- Furthermore, Israel and Saudi Arabia have a common interest in preventing the democratisation of Arab countries.

U.S. nod

- The Saudi-Israeli rapprochement has been actively supported by the Trump administration.
- The United States is extremely interested in the formation of a joint front between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran, America's principal adversary in West Asia.
- The rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv was moving apace until October 2, 2018, when Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident journalist, was murdered at the behest of the Saudi regime in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

Khashoggi murder

- However, the Khashoggi murder has thrown a spanner in the works for several reasons.
- First, the two principal Saudi interlocutors have been dismissed from their crucial positions in order to demonstrate to the international community that the Saudi regime is genuinely interested in bringing Khashoggi's murderers to justice.
- Second, Saudi's crown prince MBS, who many believe ordered the killing, has been the focus of intense criticism, including by leading Senators and Congressmen in the U.S., following the brutal murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi's body.
- MBS is also held responsible for the Yemeni misadventure, which has left thousands of civilians dead and millions on the verge of starvation.
- This does not mean that the Saudi-Israeli relationship will return to the level of hostility that had once existed between the two states.
- Rapprochement has been an ongoing process for close to two decades.
- It was dramatically expedited with the appointment of MBS as Crown Prince and the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia.
- One can, therefore, conclude that their common hostility towards Iran

and their close security relationship with the U.S. will eventually prompt Saudi Arabia and Israel to resume their covert relationship and eventually make it public.

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