
Saudi Arabia-Israel Rapprochement: Prospects and Challenges for Iran

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Abstract

The rising influence of Iran in the wake of Arab Spring threatens both Saudi Arabia and Israel. The US shares the challenge being posed by the Iranian rise. This Iranian rise has brought the three closer. The burgeoning closing of Saudi Arabia and Israel is largely shaped by this rise. However, it remains to be investigated that what is pushing Iran to expand its regional influence. The existing literature suggests it's the policy of the US in the region which gave Iran a space to expand its muscles in Middle East. However, the literature misses to study the role of changing international structure which is providing Iran an opportunity to rise where Russian and Chinese involvement have limited the hegemonic credentials of American power to support and propagate Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region. The same structure is pushing KSA and Israel closer to each other. Moreover, the paper attempts to study the possible implications Iran can face as a result of this opening up relationship.

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Introduction

Since the inception of Israel as an independent state, its relations with the Muslim majority Middle Eastern countries have been tumultuous in nature. The relationship between the Gulf states and Israel have been characterized by two dominant patterns; confrontation and cooperation. The dominant factor behind this confrontation was the question of Palestine. Israel and the Arab states went into couple of war on the issue of Palestine. However, Israel adhered to its historic claims over the Palestinian territories. This led to further tensions and kept both sides distant from each other. Though, with the passage of time, the issue of Palestine dwindled down and Israel consolidated its control over the captured territories. This led to change in the approach of Gulf countries towards Israel as the solution was only possible through negotiations. However, in the region, one state which maintained its policy of resistance against Israel was Iran. Iran, even today, claims itself to be an axis of resistance against the US and Israel. On one hand, Iran maintained its position as an arch-rival to the US and Israel. On the other, its relationship with Saudi led Gulf block remained tense. The Middle Eastern geostrategic environment is dominated by Saudi- Iran rivalry. Both sides view each other as a serious threat. Their policies have been centred on countering each other's influence in the region.

The Iranian influence is on rise in the region in the post-Arab Spring era. The survival of Syrian regime, pro-Iranian governments in Lebanon through Hezbollah and Iraq, and presence of Iran sponsored Houthis in Yemen have increased the relative power and influence of Iran. Furthermore, its potential nuclearization is yet another factor which is worrisome, not only for Saudi Arabia but Israel and the US as well. In this equation, the role of Russia and China has been very critical as they directly or indirectly enabled Iran to consolidate its power in the region threatening American as well as Saudi and Israeli interests. These factors have pushed old-rivals closer to each other against a common threat. A general perception exists that the rapprochement between KSA and Israel is Iran centred. It's true that it is Iran centred. But the literature misses to highlight that the Iranian rise is sponsored by the changing nature of international system. Resurging Russia and emerging China are two key players which are challenging the existing unipolar system. Their policies in the region have emboldened Iran which irks the rivals. This shift in the system can be understood through Russia's ability to successfully hold Syrian regime in place along with opposition of USA's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known as Iran nuclear deal.

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In the post-cold war decade, the US was an undisputed super power with no competitor. The US ensured the security of the Kingdom in return of oil. On the other end, Russia wasn't strong enough to embolden Iran to an extent it has done now. This shift in the relative power distribution alarmed the bells in the corridors of the Royal Palaces in Saudi Arabia and Israel. Moreover, the USA's took a back step during Obama administration from serving the interests of the Saudis. All these developments may have compelled KSA to get closer to Israel following the Mantra of "enemy of my enemy is my friend." Israel responded in kind as it served Israeli interests as well which is equally threatened by Iran. This alliance in development is Iran specific, yet a pertinent question rises whether it poses a challenge to Iran or will further give Iran space to exploit the relationship.

Significance of the Problem

The study is aimed at explaining the contemporary phenomenon that is affecting the dynamics of Middle Eastern political landscape. The study aspires to investigate the factors which are shaping the relationships between old time rivals Saudi Arabia and Israel which has the potential to change the political and strategic landscape of the regional actors. Furthermore, it aspires to investigate the great power politics in the regions vis-à-vis US, Russia, and China on the backdrop of changing international structure. This changing dimension of the global politics has pushed KSA towards Israel and US as Iran is being backed by resurging Russia. Therefore, the significance of the study lies in the changing nature of international structure and the way this shift is impacting the dynamics in Middle East.

Literature Review

International Crisis Group's report on Middle East "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East" (2018) claims that Iran is ascendant in the Middle East, spreading its influence in a contiguous geographic arc from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. Its rise, which began with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and accelerated when civil wars erupted in Syria and Yemen, has generated a perception that Iran aspires to be the region's hegemonic power. To the U.S. and its allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – an ambition Iran constitutes an intolerable threat.

Additionally, Udi Dekel and Yoel Guzansky in INSS Insight article (2013) claim that Some have argued recently that Saudi Arabia and Israel's shared disappointment with President Obama's policy toward Iran and Syria constitutes a convergence of interests for formulating some kind of partnership between the two countries. That disappointment is culminating into an alliance to counter the emboldened Iran.

Furthermore, they scholars in a Foreign Policy paper (2018) claim that the Iranians perceive themselves to be an embattled revolutionary state, a government that the United States and other world powers would like to eradicate if possible. And so they seek to extend their influence wherever possible.

In order to counter this expansionism, the cooperation between GCC and Tel Aviv could result in the form of intelligence sharing. In the future, the US could mediate possible cooperation in missile defense between Israel, Saudi Arabia and other countries of the GCC as predicted by Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum in a BESA Center Perspectives paper (2013).

Council on Foreign Relation (CFR) (2015) hosted a session between retired Major General Anwar Eshki from Saudi Arabia and Ambassador Dore Gold of Israel. The participants explained that the shared interest uniting Israel and Saudi Arabia during these secret meetings was nothing else, but the danger and threat to both countries emanating from Islamic Republic of Iran.

Literature Gap

Literature is present on the subject keeping in view the rising influence of Iran and its potential nuclearization. However, the literature regarding changing international structure and the way it is impacting the regional dynamics of Middle East is absent. Therefore, this study aims to explore the missing literature regarding the structural factors which are compelling KSA and Israel to reconsider their options and transforming the relationship from confrontation to strategic cooperation.

Hypothesis

The rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia is being driven by the changing international system.

Theoretical Framework

The study has been performed on the backdrop of structural realism theory of international relations. The theory was an adaptation of already existing thought of classical realism which considered state as the central unit of analysis; whose character was drawn from that of human nature which, according to classical realist, is selfish in nature. However, structural realism explains dynamics of state's behaviour in terms of the international structure. In simple words, the system is employed by the structural realists as unit of analysis in order to understand and analyse the international events and behaviour of states.

According to neorealists, system is characterized by how power is distributed in the system which they call relative distribution of power. And this relative distribution of power influences the foreign policy behaviour of states. According to them, those who ignore the relative distribution of power are subject to be doomed. In this regard, the emerging cooperation between Israel and KSA is being driven by the changing international structure. As aforementioned, in the post-cold war era, USA was guarantor of KSA security against the Kingdom's regional enemy Iran. However, the relative decline in the power of the US has challenged this posture as the resurging Russia has gained diplomatic and strategic grounds in the region and has emerged as Iran's reliable ally in the region which not only threatens KSA, but also challenges the security and interests of Israel. Therefore, the realization of Russia's unwavering support to Iran has pushed Saudi Arabia towards Israel which can pave a way into White House in a more effective way as Israel enjoys special relationship with the US.

Research Questions

1. What is bringing KSA and Israel close to each other?
2. How the regional structure has changed? And to what extent it has created shared interests for Saudi Arabia and Israel?
3. What can be the challenges for Iran as a result of increasing ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel?

Research Methodology

The study follows qualitative in nature as it attempts to explore the fill the gap in existing literature through non-numerical data. The technique of content analysis has been employed. In addition, both primary and secondary data types have been taken in to account. Primary data includes the official policy statements, speeches, and official documents. Whereas, published journal articles, books, newspaper articles constitute secondary data.

Rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia

The most important actors of the region are Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel. Their policies influence the regional dynamics. In the Cold War years, the relations between KSA and Israel remained antagonistic in nature over the issue of Palestine. Rivalry and non-cooperation remained the defining pillars of their relationship. This has changed now. The relations between historic rivals Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel are taking new shape amidst the changing power structure in the region and abroad. The rise of Iranian power in the region has brought the old-rivals close as evident from the recent interactions between the leadership of the two countries. Both, KSA and Israel, share the threat emanating from the Iranian expansionism and potential nuclearization. In an unprecedented interview to the Saudi newspaper Elaph, Israel's military chief, General Gadi Eisenkot described Iran as the "biggest threat to the region". He also said that Israel would be ready to share intelligence with "moderate" Arab states like Saudi Arabia in order to "deal with" Tehran. On the other hand, the Saudi crown prince, Muhammad Bin Salman, said, "I believe that each people, anywhere, have a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land." It's very rare to hear an Arab leader recognizing Israel's right to exist as an independent sovereign state. According to analysts, the main driving force between the two states is rise of Iranian influence and power in the region.

Iran has emerged as a potential regional power in the wake of Arab uprisings in 2011. Its influence has increased across the region through its Shia led axes. Specifically, the triumph of Shia regime in Syria and the

consolidation of Iranian influence in Lebanon has alarmed the rings for its regional rivals; Israel and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the two countries are in the process of forming an alliance to counter the rising threat which ultimately challenges Iran.

However, the mutual threat of Iran has brought the two countries closer, yet it's the changing international structure which is influencing Riyadh and Tel Aviv as the system backed by China and Russia is favoring Iran. The relative power of the US has dwindled down as compared to its unilateral dominance of the world order in post-cold war era. This shift has equally compelled both Saudi Arabia and Israel to reconsider their relationship.

Changing International Structure

The international system has been subject to change. The cold war years witnessed a bipolar structure dominated by the US and the USSR. However, the fall of the Soviet Union gave America an open space to dominate the global structure unilaterally. Yet again, the system is transforming from unipolar to multipolar as the rise of China and resurgence of Russian power along with other regional actors such as India has challenged the sole super power status of the US. Hence, it has forced US to revisit its policy options as evident from Obama administration's drive to sign an agreement with Iran, even against the wishes of its old friends; Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US has been a guarantor of the security of the Gulf monarchies, specifically Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to its massive economic interests. Even it checked the rise of Iranian influence through sanctions and supporting Israel. However, the rise of other actors i.e. Russia and China started challenging American Power and its ability to sustain the world order it created in the wake of Cold War. For instance, China and Russia challenged America's position on Syria and vetoed its will to military intervention in Syria. Russia led by Vladimir Putin provided Syria not only with diplomatic, but military support as well. The reason involved was Moscow's strategic interests in the country.

This strategic support to Syria was to protect Russian interests. However, it also provided Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence and footprint in the war torn Syria bringing Tehran even closer to the borders of Israel. China and Russia's strategic partnership is getting deeper challenging the US and its allies as evident from the recent meeting between the presidents of China and Russia in which Putin Mr. Putin alleged that ties between the two nations stood at "an unprecedented level". Moreover, even China's strategic partnership with Russia further challenged the position of the US and hence that of its allies i.e. Saudi Arabia and Israel. Though China and Russia have active relations with KSA and Israel as well, yet their consistent support to Iran in the form of JCPOA and uplifting of economic sanctions challenged American position on Iran, thus, favoring Iran. Moreover, Russia and China's resolve to abide by the deal in the wake of American withdrawal from the nuclear deal and is yet another instance reflecting the limitations of American power. Protecting Iran might not be the priority of Russia and China. But their own national interests compelled them to resist American influence which ultimately fell in the favor of Iran as Iran's stability served their interests in the region. Russia and Chinese strategic partnership against the dominance of the US proved beneficial for Iran.

As a consequence, the KSA and Tel Aviv started feeling threatened as a more powerful Iran with an extensive network of proxies across the region and economic recovery followed by the uplift of international sanctions challenged their position in the region. Therefore, in order to address the rising Iranian threat, they are coming closer. Saudi Arabia seeks to consolidate its position in the White House through Israel which enjoys cordial relations with the US. Furthermore, allying with Israel will help Saudi Arabia to counter Iranian influence in more effective way. Whereas, Israel's interests are obvious vis-à-vis this surfacing rapprochement as it will be able to expand its influence in the Gulf States creating a strong resistance to Iranian rise. In addition, this rapprochement serves American interests as well as it will counter a common Iranian threat. Furthermore, it will give the US a diplomatic leverage vis-a-vis Russia and China.

Prospects and Challenges for Iran

As aforementioned, the rapprochement is Iranian centered mainly driven by the changing nature of international structure. However, a pertinent question rises whether the cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia threatens Iran or it gives Iran an opportunity. The answer lies in looking into both options as it can work both ways for Iran.

The commencement of cooperation between the two regional actors is multifaceted extending from intelligence sharing to economic substance. This can potentially threaten Iran as the cooperation in sharing intelligence may lead to more sophisticated joint operations against the Iranian backed proxies in the region. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia may serve as a mediator between Israel and other Gulf States, hence limiting the footprint of Iran even within GCC. Similarly, the alliance will create a diplomatic leverage for the US as well because of Israel's and Saudi Arabia's engagement with China and Russia. Joint diplomatic as well as military ventures may yield a more effective and more powerful response to Iranian rise. Furthermore, the melting of ice may result in a possible solution to Palestine issue as the KSA will want to convince the Israeli leadership against the benefits Iran gains through Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Hence, if Saudi Arabia succeeds in convincing Tel Aviv that the solution to Palestinian conflict will rid Iran of the excuse it exploits to recruit more proxies in the region. However, the relationship between Israel and KSA may backfire with reference to Iran.

The alliance, even covert in nature, may prove an opportunity for Iran as well. Iran claims itself as an axis of resistance against the American and Israeli aggression and injustice in the region. Hence, the closing up of Tel Aviv and Reyadh may give Iran another opportunity to exploit the religious sentiments of millions of Muslims by labeling the KSA as a friend of Israel which denies the Palestinians their right to land and self-determination. In this way Iranian actions in the region will get further legitimacy from the local as well as foreign masses. Secondly, this cooperation may further consolidate Iranian resolve to acquire nuclear capability on the notion of serious threats to its national security. Most importantly, the major powers like China and Russia will stand by Iran's side as they will not be ready to compromise Iran's stability as it served their own interests. Therefore, the prospects of cooperation between the two regional actors with reference to diplomatic efforts may be limited as they will not be ready to sacrifice their strategic interests vis-à-vis the USA in the region. Hence, the rapprochement comes with some prospects and challenges for Iran.

Conclusion & Findings

In short, the recently surfaced covert cooperation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel is Iran specific. The main aim, as the evidence suggests, is to counter ever increasing influence of Iran. However, this alliance-making is not local. It is being driven by the policies of the great powers in the region which are changing the international structure. Saudi Arabia and Israel have realized the relative decline in the power of the US and its inability to counter Iran for them has diminished. Russia and China have emerged as the main driving forces behind the expansion of Iranian footprint in the region as their policies vis-à-vis Syria and their diplomatic stance vis-à-vis Yemen have favored Iran rather than Israel or Saudi Arabia. Therefore, as this alliance challenges Iran, it also brings a window of opportunity for Iran as well as aforementioned. The key finding out of this study are given below.

- Rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia is local in scope but is being shaped by the shift in international political system.
- Russia's strategic partnership with Iran and China serves Iranian interests against the US.
- China and Russia will not compromise their interests vis-à-vis Iran as their presence in the region is extensive and tactically aimed at limiting the American influence in the region.
- As the alliance poses certain challenges to Iran. It also brings opportunities for Iran as well through which Iran can gain legitimacy and popular support and win public opinion against Saudi Arabia.

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