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## Cooperation in Israeli–Saudi Relations: Impact on Iran in the Middle East

### Abstract

*The study explores the transformation in great power politics and factors affecting the dynamics of the Middle Eastern political landscape, such as the relationships between ideological arch-rivals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Israel. The closing up of the relationship between KSA and Israel is a historic transformation, holding immense potential embodying change in the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The article argues that the changing dynamics of global power politics has polarised the political dynamics of the Middle Eastern region along opposite poles. The US, China and Russian involvement in the Middle Eastern region have pushed the ideological arch-rival of KSA to the US and Israel, pushing Iran to tilt towards Russia and China in the region. Therefore, the significance of the study lies in the changing nature of international structure and the way this shift has impacted the inter-dynamics of Saudi-Israeli cooperation in the Middle East.*

**Key Words:** Arch Rivals, KSA, Political Landscape, Region, Polarisation

### Introduction

The study analyses factors for the change in the regional political landscape of the Middle East such as the cooperation between ideological arch-rivals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Israel. The article argues that global transformation has induced polarisation in the Middle Eastern region. The closing up of the relationship between KSA and Israel is a historic transformation. It has a strong impact on the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The article aims to explore the missing literature regarding structural factors, which are compelling KSA and Israel to reconsider options and transform the relationship from confrontation to strategic cooperation. It also explores the extent to which there exist shared interests for Saudi Arabia and Israel, involving increasing ties between the two. This situation has posed new challenges for Iran in the region. Moreover, the article attempts to study the possible implications Iran can face as a result of KSA and Israel closing up. In this backdrop, it's argued that the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia is being driven by the changing international system.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the influence of Iran has increased in the Middle East ([Choksy, 2011](#)). Iranian expansion of influence has threatened both Saudi Arabia and Israel. The survival of the Syrian regime and that of the pro-Iranian governments in Lebanon and Iraq through Hezbollah and the presence of Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen has expanded the relative power and influence of Iran in the Middle East. Furthermore, the potential nuclearization of Iran is yet another worrisome factor, not only for Saudi Arabia but for the US and Israel. The rise in Iranian influence has posed a challenge for the US. The latter has tried to lock in Saudi-Israeli cooperation to tackle Tehran in the Middle East. However, it remains to be investigated as to what has pushed Iranian expansion of regional influence in the Middle East.

In the post-cold war era, the US emerged as the undisputed power in the Middle East. The US ensured the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in return for the supply of oil from Riyadh. At the same time, Russia had not been strong enough to embolden Iran to the extent it had done now. The shift in relative power distribution has alarmed the bells in the corridors of the Royal palaces in Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Since the inception of Israel as an independent state, the Tel Aviv relationship has been tumultuous in nature with the Muslim majority states in the Middle East. Two dominant patterns of

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confrontation and cooperation have defined the relationship between the Gulf States and Israel. The question of Palestine has been the dominant factor spoiling Israel-Arab states bilateral relations. Israel has gone into a couple of wars with the Arab states on the Palestinian issue. Its historical claims on Palestinian territories fuelled tensions in Israel-Arab relations. With the passage of time, however, the issue of Palestine dwindled down as Israel consolidated its control over the captured territories. This led to a change in the approach of the Gulf States towards Israel, as both realized that the solution was possible only through negotiations.

One state in the region—Iran, however, maintained its policy of resistance against Israel. Tehran has maintained its position as a symbol of opposition to the power of the US and Israel. On the one hand, Iran posed a threat to its arch-rival, the US and Israel. On the other, its relationship with Saudi Arabia led to the Gulf block remained tense. The Middle Eastern geostrategic environment thus remained dominated by Saudi-Iran rivalry. Both sides have posed serious threats to each other. Their policies have centred on countering each other's influence in the Middle Eastern region.

Contemporary literature on the subject has elaborated causes for the rise of the influence of Iran and its potential nuclearisation in the region. The existing literature suggests that the US policy gave Iran space to expand its muscle in the Middle East. For example, the International Crisis Group's report on Middle East 'Iran's Priorities in the Turbulent Middle East' ([International Crisis Group: 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 began with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and accelerated when civil wars erupted in Syria and Yemen. Iran increasing influence has generated a perception that Iran aspires to become a hegemonic power in the Middle East. To the US and its allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – an ambition Iran constitutes an intolerable threat in the region.

Additionally, the deteriorating security situation in the region is giving space to new thinking in policy circles. Heightening tensions between the regional states, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, are the result of excessive regional instability and mistrust ([Rahman, 2019](#)). A significant factor that has shaped the regional political and strategic landscape of the Middle East is the role played by the US active presence in the region. This involvement proved a support system for the gulf monarchies since the times of the Cold War. However, the recent shift in the policy under the Obama administration created concerns in the minds of regional Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and UAE. The strategic shift in US policy in the Middle East came as a result of changing the structure of the international system, which has created checks on the exercise of US power. The relative decline of US power is worrisome for the Gulf States as their arch-rival Iran is being backed by rising China and resurging Russia. This is evident from the recent setbacks to US policy in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In this regard, scholars such as ([Dekel & Guzansky 2013](#)) have claimed that Saudi-Israeli shared disappointment with the US policy towards Iran and Syria constituted a convergence of interests between the two states for formulating partnership. Scholars such as ([Chazan 2018](#)) have claimed that disappointment with the US policy has culminated into a Saudi-Israeli alliance partnership to counter emboldened Iran. Furthermore, they argue that Iranians perceive themselves to be an embattled revolutionary state, a government that the US and other world powers would like to eradicate if possible. In order to counter this expansionism, the cooperation between the Gulf States and Tel Aviv could result in the form of intelligence sharing. In the future, the US could mediate possible cooperation in the Missile Defense System between Israel, Saudi Arabia and other states of the GCC as predicted in the Perspectives paper of Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESC) ([Teitelbaum, 2013](#)). In the same vein, deliberations on the platform of Council of Foreign Relations ([Abrams, 2015](#)) in a session hosted between Anwar Eshki from Saudi Arabia and Ambassador Dore Gold of Israel informed the shared interest in uniting Saudi-Arabia with Israel in secret meetings, as nothing else but the danger and threat to both states emanating from Iran.

The US, China and Russian involvement in the Middle East have induced binary division in the Middle East. Great powers involvement has tilted the ideological arch-rival of Saudi Arabia towards the US and Israel, while Russia influence has taken Iran in its ambit. Therefore, the significance of the study lies in the transformation of the international structure and the way it has impacted the inter-dynamics of Saudi Arabia and Israel in the Middle East. The article has employed the theoretical perspective of neo-structural realism. The theory explains state behaviour in terms of the international

structure. In simple words, the system is employed by structural realists as a unit of analysis in order to understand and analyze international events and behaviour of states. According to neo-realists, the system is characterized by how power is distributed in the system, which they call the relative distribution of power. The relative distribution of power influences the foreign policy behaviour of states. Accordingly, those who ignore the relative distribution of power are subject to be doomed.

A general perception exists that the rapprochement between KSA and Israel is Iran centric. Resurging Russia and emerging China are two key players in the region, reflecting a change in regional and global dynamics of the Middle East. Russian and Chinese involvement in the region has limited the US hegemonic credentials to support Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region. This, in turn, has provided Iran with the opportunity to increase influence. The same structure is pushing KSA and Israel to move closer to each other. 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 thereby the US, Saudi Arabian and Israeli interests (Sadr, 2005). Russia's ability to successfully hold the Syrian regime in place, along with the US decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action known as the Iran nuclear deal, has created space for Iran to assert influence in the region. Russian policies in the wider Middle Eastern region have emboldened Iran, which has irked Tehran's rivals. Old rivals such as KSA and Israel moved closer to each other against the common threat posed by Tehran. Iranian rise, therefore, has been sponsored by the changing nature of the international system. The burgeoning closing of Saudi Arabia and Israel has thus being shaped largely by the rise of Iran in the Middle East. Moreover, the US took a back step during the Obama administration from serving the interests of the Saudis.

In the post-Cold War era, the US has been the guarantor of KSA security against its regional enemy Iran. However, the relative decline in the power of the US has challenged this posture, as 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. Tel Aviv enjoys a special relationship with the US. All these developments may have compelled KSA to get closer to Israel following the mantra of 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' (Pillar, 2018). Threatened equally by Iran, Israel responded in kind as it served its interests to ally with KSA. This Israeli-Saudi alliance is Iran specific. Yet, a pertinent question arises how has this relationship impacted Iran's position in the Middle East. In this perspective, the emerging cooperation between Israel and KSA is being driven by the changing global structure.

### Israel-Saudi Rapprochement

The most important actors of the Middle Eastern region are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel. Their policies have long influenced the regional dynamics of the Middle East. 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 winds of change in the structure are pushing Saudi Arabia to adopt a more realistic and pragmatic approach (Abadi, 2019). On the other end, Israel has responded with the same approach as Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said, "Recently, I have been promoting, under the backing of the United States, a political initiative to sign 'non-aggression agreements' with the Arab Gulf states." (Gadzo, 2019). 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. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, met the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and UAE in February in Warsaw, and the sole purpose of this unusual meeting was to help each other in containing the rising threat from Iran (Black, 2019). KSA and Israel share the threat emanating from Iranian expansionism and potential nuclearization. In an unprecedented interview with the Saudi newspaper Elaph, Israel's military chief, General Gadi Eisenkot, described Iran as the "biggest threat to the region" (Beaumont, 2017). He also said that Israel would be ready to share intelligence with 'moderate' Arab states like Saudi Arabia in order to deal with Tehran. Even The ex-Saudi Intelligence Chief Turki Al-Faisal revealed that Israel and a number of Gulf states shared secret relations for years

(MEMO, 2019). 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’ (Jonathan Marcus, 2018). 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 the 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 the Shia regime in Syria and the consolidation of Iranian influence in Lebanon have alarmed its regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Iranian Proxies in the region are a real threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia (Hatuga, 2019). The two states are in the process of forming an alliance partnership to counter the rising threat, which ultimately challenges Iran. As the relationship between the two is burgeoning and is being publically acknowledged, the evidence of cooperation is already surfacing as it was claimed that the Kingdom used “Israeli-made cyberweapons to monitor and intimidate dissidents abroad” (Lake, 2019). The mutual threat of Iran has brought the two countries closer; however, it is the changing international structure that 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 the post-Cold War era (Behm, 2019). This shift has equally compelled both Saudi Arabia and Israel to reconsider their relationship.

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 the resurgence of Russian power along with other regional actors such as India has challenged the sole superpower status of the US. Hence, it has forced the US to revisit its policy options, as evident from the Obama administration’s drive to sign an agreement with Iran, even against the wishes of its old friends-- Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The US has been a guarantor of the security of the Gulf monarchies since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 due to Washington’s massive economic interest in the region (Byman & Moller, 2016). The US checked Iran through the imposition of sanctions and by extending support to Israel. However, the rise of other actors, i.e. Russia and China, have started to challenge the US power and its ability to sustain the world order it created in the wake of the post-Cold War. For instance, China and Russia have challenged the US position on Syria and vetoed the US military interventionism in Syria. Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, provided Syria with diplomatic and military support due to Moscow’s strategic interests in that state. However, it also provided Iran with the opportunity to expand its influence and footprint in 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 (Evers, 2109), as evident from the recent meeting between the Chinese and Russian presidents. China and Russia declared that ties between the two states stood at an unprecedented high level. Moreover, China’s strategic partnership with Russia further challenged the US position and of its allies Saudi Arabia and Israel (Jaffer, 2019). 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 the US position and favored Iran. Moreover, Russia and China’s resolve to abide by the deal in the wake of the US withdrawal from nuclear is yet another instance reflecting the limitations of American power. Protecting Iran might not be the priority of Russia and China. The two states own national interests compelled them to resist the US influence, which ultimately fell in Iran’s favor. Iran’s stability served their interests in the region. Russia and the Chinese strategic partnership against the dominance of the US proved beneficial for Iran.

Riyadh and Tel Aviv felt threatened as a consequence. A more powerful Iran, with an extensive network of proxies across the region followed by the uplift of international sanctions, challenged the US position in the region. In order to address the rising Iranian threat, therefore, Saudi-Israeli cooperation developed. 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 a more effective way. Israel interests are obvious vis-à-vis this surfacing rapprochement. 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 will

counter a common Iranian threat. Furthermore, it will give the US diplomatic leverage vis-a-vis Russia and China.

### **Impact on Iran: Challenges and Options**

As aforementioned, the rapprochement is Iranian centred mainly driven by the changing nature of the international structure. However, a pertinent question arises 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 the 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 the other Gulf States, hence limiting the footprint of Iran even within GCC. Similarly, the alliance will create diplomatic leverage for the US as well because of Israel and Saudi Arabia's engagement with China and Russia. Joint diplomatic and military ventures may yield a more effective and powerful response to Iranian rise. Furthermore, the melting of ice may result in a possible solution to the 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, Saudi Arabia may succeed in convincing Tel Aviv that the solution to the Palestinian conflict will rid Iran of the excuse it exploits in recruiting 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 Riyadh may give Iran another opportunity to exploit the religious sentiments of millions of Muslims by labelling the KSA as a friend of Israel, which denies the Palestinians their right to land and self-determination as the cooperation may not enjoy the popular support in Saudi Arabia ([Amouyal, 2018](#)). Another significant factor in this regard is the issue of relations with Israel is not attractive to the wider Arab community ([Kasnett, 2018](#)). 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 ([Bohl & Bohl, 2018](#)). Most importantly, major powers like China and Russia will stand by Iran's side as they will not be ready to compromise on Iran's stability as it served their own interests. The prospects of cooperation, therefore, 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 US in the region.

### **Conclusion**

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 the ever-increasing influence of Iran. However, this alliance-in-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 the 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. The rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia is local in scope but is being shaped by the shift in the 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 are 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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