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# Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018

Elie Podeh

*Media reports have recently indicated that Israel and Saudi Arabia have been cooperating behind the scenes against their common enemies, Iran and jihadist groups. This article sets to explore the rationale behind and essence of this cooperation, while putting it in proper historical perspective. The article shows that Saudi policy toward Israel was consistently dictated by pragmatism rather than ideology, while Israel's suspicions toward the kingdom disappeared only following the 2006 Lebanon War and the Arab Spring.*

**T**he chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot, met with his Saudi counterpart, Gen. Fayyad bin Hamid al-Ruwayli, on the sidelines of the October 2018 Counter-Violent Extremist Organizations Conference in Washington, DC, in what was the first-ever publicized meeting between high-ranking Israeli and Saudi officials. The fact that Eisenkot had also met his Egyptian, Jordanian, and Bahraini counterparts indicates that these meetings focused on common threats, including Iran, jihadist terrorism, and others.<sup>1</sup> Almost one year earlier, in November 2017, in his first-ever interview to a London-based Saudi online newspaper, Eisenkot stated that Iran was the “real and greatest threat to the region” and that Israel and Saudi Arabia were in complete agreement about its intentions. He emphasized that Israel was willing to share information with Saudi Arabia, in view of the two countries’ numerous shared interests.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, in February 2016, an Israeli television channel reported that a high-profile Israeli delegation had secretly visited Riyadh.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, senior Israeli officials, Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon and Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, confirmed that secret meetings were being held between Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Anna Ahronheim, “Report: IDF Chief of Staff Eisenkot Met with Saudi Counterpart,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 17, 2018, [www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-IDF-Chief-of-Staff-Eisenkot-met-with-Saudi-counterpart-569585](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-IDF-Chief-of-Staff-Eisenkot-met-with-Saudi-counterpart-569585).

2. Majdi Halabi, “رئيس الأركان الإسرائيلي لـ‘إيلاف’: لا توجد نية لمهاجمة حزب الله بلبنان,” [“Israeli chief of staff to *Elaph*: There is no intention to attack Hizbullah in Lebanon”], *Elaph*, November 16, 2017, <https://elaph.com/Web/News/2017/11/1177142.html>. For more, see Amos Harel, “Israeli Military Chief Gives Unprecedented Interview to Saudi Media: ‘Ready to Share Intel on Iran,’” *Haaretz* (Israel), November 17, 2017, [www.haaretz.com/1.5466066](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5466066).

3. Gil Ronen, “Top Israeli Delegation ‘Visited Riyadh Secretly,’” *Arutz Sheva* (Israel), March 2, 2016, [www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/208806](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/208806).

4. Interview by the author with Ya’alon, May 21, 2017, Tel Aviv; Reuters, “Israel Has Secret Contacts with Saudi Arabia, Senior Minister Reveals,” *Haaretz*, November 20, 2017, [www.haaretz.com/1.5466779](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5466779).

Cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia looks, on the face of it, inconceivable. Yet, in spite of the existing formal state of war, the two states have never been involved in any hostilities, and mutual animosity has mainly been reflected in their leaders' rhetoric. In fact, it was Saudi Arabia that announced two peace initiatives to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1981 and 2002. The two countries also appeared to share interests on several occasions: Egypt's involvement in the North Yemen Civil War (1962–67), Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990), the 2006 Lebanon War, and the Iranian nuclear issue. In these and other episodes the two countries seemed to be bound in a covert alliance against common enemies, which evolved into indirect bilateral ties and occasional covert meetings. The outcome is a relationship that simultaneously reflects animosity and cooperation.

The aim of this article is to analyze the evolution of the unique relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia since even before 1948.<sup>5</sup> Its main argument is that Israeli-Saudi relations exemplify *quiet diplomacy*, which entails veiled collaboration between two states in pursuit of peaceful objectives and is reflected in both explicit and tacit communications and understandings that are concealed from domestic constituencies and other external actors.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Israel and Saudi Arabia, whatever ties that existed were maintained in complete secrecy and denied when exposed. Nonetheless, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 and Iran's increasing assertiveness and backing of Shi'i militias in the region, hidden connections between Israel and Saudi Arabia came out into the open. Saudi willingness to expose this relationship stems from its desire to use the Israeli (as well as American) card as a deterrent against Iran.

### *IN THE BEGINNING: MUTUAL IMAGES AND POLICIES*

Unlike most Arab countries, the Saudi state and other Gulf countries had little contact with Jews before the 20th century, as Jews had not lived in those areas for many centuries. The founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia — 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd al-Rahman Al Sa'ud, referred to in Western media at the time as Ibn Sa'ud — had met a Jewish moneylender in Kuwait in 1901,<sup>7</sup> but otherwise his knowledge of Jews was based on Islamic religious texts. A meticulous study of 'Abd al-'Aziz's attitude

5. For earlier works on Israeli-Saudi relations, see Joseph Kostiner, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: The Fluctuation of Regional Coordination," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3 (2009): 417–29. doi:10.1080/13530190903338946; Tamar Yegness, "Saudi Arabia and the Peace Process," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 18 (Winter 1981): 101–20; Aeed Dawisha, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Ups and Downs of Pragmatic Cooperation," *International Journal* 38, no. 4 (Autumn 1983): 674–89. doi:10.2307/40202206; Elie Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative, 2002–2014: A Plausible Missed Opportunity," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 584–603. doi:10.3751/68.4.15; Gawdat Bahgat, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 49–56. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2007.00312.x; Jacob Abadi, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: The Persistence of Hostility and the Prospects for Normalization," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1998): 52–75.

6. Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Quiet Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 9–10.

7. 'Abd al-'Aziz met the lender while he was in dire financial straits, pawning a jewel-encrusted sword given to him by the Kuwaiti emir, see Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, fourth edition (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 173.

toward Jews and Israel shows that he held a clearly demonized image of Jews.<sup>8</sup> A good example of this perception can be found in a 1937 report by Lieutenant Colonel H. R. P. Dickson, who had previously served as the United Kingdom's Political Agent in Kuwait, which quoted 'Abd al-'Aziz to the effect that Jews were "a race accused by God . . . destined to final destruction and eternal damnation hereafter," adding that "Our hatred for the Jews dates from God's condemnation of them for their persecution and rejection of Isa (Jesus Christ), and their subsequent rejection later of His Chosen Prophet [i.e., Muhammad]." Yet, a relatively unknown story throws a different light on 'Abd al-'Aziz's image of Jews: Lt. Col. Frederick Kisch — chair of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the official governing body for Jews in the country — wrote in his diary that when 'Abd al-'Aziz had met Arab pilgrims from Hebron after the 1929 massacre of 67 Jews in the city, he reproached them, saying, "Show me in the Holy Books where you are authorized to murder Jews; God will never forgive you for what you have done!"<sup>10</sup>

'Abd al-'Aziz's attitude toward the Zionist-Arab conflict in Palestine was pragmatic. His mediation efforts to end the 1936–39 Arab revolt in Palestine stemmed from a desire to pacify the British and thwart the regional ambitions of the Hashemite dynasty, which he had ousted a decade before from its traditional seat of power in Hijaz and thereby formed the core of Saudi Arabia. Thus, when Britain's Palestine Royal Commission published its partition plan in 1937, known as the Peel Report, 'Abd al-'Aziz did not object so much to the idea of a Jewish state as to the establishment of an Arab Palestine under the control of his Hashemite rival, Emir 'Abdullah of Transjordan (later King 'Abdullah I of Jordan). 'Abd al-'Aziz's main concern was of a possible expansion of Hashemite territory in the Arab world, which could pose a serious threat to the very existence of the Saudi kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

On the Zionist side, negative perceptions prevailed as well; in 1938, Moshe Shertok, the head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department who was known for supporting conciliatory policies toward Arabs, referred to 'Abd al-'Aziz's "impermeable wall of religious fanaticism, blind hatred, and religious interdictions and injunctions that separate him and us."<sup>12</sup> In spite of these negative perceptions, the king's rising status prompted the Zionist leaders to seek a way to approach him. In March 1937, Shertok (who later changed his surname to Sharett) visited the Saudi legation in London in an effort to send a message to 'Abd al-'Aziz clarifying the Zionist position, but with no success.<sup>13</sup> In another attempt, Eliahu Epstein (who would later change his surname to Elath and served as Israel's first ambassador to the United States) went to Beirut to meet 'Abd al-'Aziz's

8. The most detailed research on the Saudi attitude toward Jews during 'Abd al-'Aziz's reign was published by Mikha'el Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 212–76.

9. Quoted in Elie Kedourie, *Islam in the Modern World and Other Studies* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 71.

10. F. H. Kisch, *Palestine Diary* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), 421.

11. Kedourie, *Islam in the Modern World*, 71; Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 178–201; Gabriel Sheffer, "The Involvement of Arab States in the Palestine Conflict," *Asian and African Studies* 10, no. 1 (1974): 59–78.

12. Quoted in Yehoshua Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930–1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 80.

13. Moshe Sharett, 1937 יומן מדיני [Making of Policy: The Diaries of Moshe Sharett, Vol. 2, 1937], ed. Ahuvia Malkin (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1971), 60–61.

adviser for foreign affairs, Fu'ad Hamza, whom Epstein had known as a student at the American University of Beirut. This acquaintance paved the way for two meetings in April 1937 between Hamza and David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency at the time (and until 1948, when he became Israel's first prime minister). The talks went well, although no response came from 'Abd al-'Aziz.<sup>14</sup> Ben-Gurion then attempted to reach out to the king through St John Philby, a former British intelligence official and expert on the Arabian Peninsula known for his close ties to the king. At their meeting, Philby suggested a plan that was immediately rejected by Ben-Gurion: a united Palestine (including Transjordan) under Saudi control.<sup>15</sup> In August 1938, Ben-Gurion's meeting with Hafiz Wahba, the Saudi ambassador in London, similarly failed to produce results.<sup>16</sup> In October 1939, Philby offered another suggestion to Shertok and World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann (who eventually became Israel's first president): "in return for a subsidy of 20 million pounds, paid to Ibn Saud, the Jews should take over western Palestine"<sup>17</sup> except for Jerusalem — a scheme that would involve a massive transfer of Palestine's Arab population and the eventual establishment of Arab unity under the Saudi king. The idea was presented to 'Abd al-'Aziz, but he rejected the so-called Philby Plan, which only confirmed his negative preconceptions of Jews as being driven by money.<sup>18</sup>

In December 1945, Saudi Arabia supported the new Arab League's boycott of companies dealing with Zionists in Palestine, which, after 1948, would become a full boycott of Israel. After 1957, even oil tankers that docked in Haifa were refused entry into Saudi Arabia. In fact, Saudi Arabia went as far as to prohibit Jews (not just Israelis) from entering the kingdom or working in any foreign company based there. The US was asked not to employ Jews in the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco, which officially became the Saudi Arabian Oil Company after it was nationalized in 1988).<sup>19</sup> Adherence to the boycott continued until the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Although Jewish businesspeople had begun to enter Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s, it was only after the 1993 Oslo Accords that official Jewish delegations were allowed to visit the kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

While Saudi Arabia opposed the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947, which proposed dividing Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states, the king was even more strongly opposed to any attempt by the Hashemites to expand their sphere of influence in the Arab world. Likewise, 'Abd al-'Aziz was less concerned about a Jewish state than the possibility of a secret Hashemite-Zionist plot to

14. Eliahu Elath, שיבת ציון וערב, [The return to Zion and the Arabs] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1974), 314–27; David Ben-Gurion, פגישות עם מנהיגים ערביים, [My Talks with Arab Leaders] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 130–37.

15. Ben-Gurion, פגישות עם מנהיגים ערביים, [My Talks with Arab Leaders], 137–50.

16. Ben-Gurion, פגישות עם מנהיגים ערביים, [My Talks with Arab Leaders], 210–14.

17. Elizabeth Monroe, *Philby of Arabia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 225.

18. Monroe, *Philby of Arabia*, 219–25. See also Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity*, 80–106; Kahanon, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין, [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 303–31; H. StJ. B. Philby, *Arabian Jubilee* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1954), 213–19.

19. Terence Prittie and Walter Henry Nelson, *The Economic War against the Jews* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), 71, 76, 86; Gil Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation: The Political Economy of the Arab Boycott of Israel* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 26, 98–99, 151.

20. Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation*, 38–39.

21. Prittie and Nelson, *Economic War against the Jews*, 76; Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation*, 51.

divide Palestine between them. He also opposed the Hashemites' main rival in Palestine, Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni of Jerusalem, who threatened 'Abd al-'Aziz's claim to be custodian of the Islamic holy sites by presenting himself as the religious guardian of the city's Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Sharif*), a complex of holy sites known to Jews as the Temple Mount.<sup>22</sup> When it became clear that war in Palestine was imminent, 'Abd al-'Aziz, who had preferred an imposed British solution, did his best to thwart an Arab League decision in favor of an economic boycott of the Western powers. Unwilling to remain outside the Arab consensus, he sent a symbolic military force placed under Egyptian command, but it did not participate in the fighting.<sup>23</sup> As such, the Saudi king successfully maneuvered between state interests and regional constraints.

While 'Abd al-'Aziz rejected Jewish/Zionist claims on Palestine on the basis of historical and demographic arguments, he was willing to recognize Jews as a religious minority as allowed by the Qur'an.<sup>24</sup> In a secret letter to an American officer, the Saudi king admitted that he "hates the Jews more than anyone else" because he believed the Qur'an had identified them, along with idolaters, as the most hostile peoples to Muslims.<sup>25</sup> In spite of these and other statements, 'Abd al-'Aziz's policy in the realm of the Arab-Israeli conflict was dictated by pure realpolitik, which meant securing the support of Western powers and thwarting any plans of Hashemite aggrandizement in the Arab world. This legacy would be retained and refined by 'Abd al-'Aziz's successors.

King 'Abd al-'Aziz died in 1953 and was succeeded by his son Sa'ud. It soon became clear that the new Egyptian leader, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, and his radical pan-Arab ideology constituted a graver threat to the kingdom than the Hashemites had posed. This realization put an end to the Saudi-Hashemite animosity that had lasted for more than three decades.<sup>26</sup> Saudi-Egyptian hostility reached a climax when Egypt intervened militarily in Yemen to help the army officers who had instigated a coup in September 1962 and proclaimed a republic. The Saudis feared that the Egyptians' ultimate target was to take control of their oil fields. In order to halt the Egyptians, the Saudis supported the Yemeni royalists. Although only covertly, Israel was also involved in Yemen, supporting the royalists by flying in ammunition, equipment, and food.<sup>27</sup> The Yemeni crisis thus placed Saudi Arabia and Israel on the same side for the first time, together

22. Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 244, 280–82.

23. Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 94–97; Ghasan Salamé, السياسة الخارجية السعودية منذ عام ١٩٤٥: دراسة في العلاقات الدولية [Saudi foreign policy since 1945: A study in international relations] (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabi, 1980), 546–48.

24. See, in particular, his interview in Noel F. Busch, "The King of Arabia: Ibn Saud, a Self-Made Monarch, Rules a Nation Just Emerging from the Time of Mohamed," *Life*, March 31, 1943, 76–77; Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 246–250.

25. Quoted in Kahanov, ערב הסעודית והסכסוך בפלסטין [Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Palestine], 250.

26. Elie Podeh, "Ending an Age-Old Rivalry: The *Rapprochement* between the Hashemites and the Saudis, 1956–1958," in *The Hashemites in the Arab World: Essays in Honour of the Late Professor Uriel Dann*, ed. Asher Susser and Aryeh Shmuelevitz (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 85–108.

27. Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War, 1962–1965: Ministers, Mercenaries and Mandarins* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 136, 148–49; Asher Orkaby, "The 1964 Israeli Airlift to Yemen and the Expansion of Weapons Diplomacy," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 26, no. 4 (2015): 659–77. doi:10.1080/09592296.2015.1096691. See the memoirs of the Israeli pilot in charge of the operation, Arye 'Oz, שמע ישראל: תשרי חשוך כסלף [Hear O Israel: Tishre, Heshvan, Kislev] (Tel Aviv: Ofir Bikurim, 2011), 112–67.

with other countries that saw Nasserism as a threat. As would be expected, these shared interests did not manifest themselves publicly, and while it is possible that the Saudis were unaware of Israeli support to the Yemeni royalists, there are hints that Kamal Adham, the head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate, was aware that Israel was violating Saudi airspace when assisting the royalists but turned a blind eye.<sup>28</sup>

It is equally plausible that some indirect coordination was engineered between Israel and King Faisal, who toppled his brother Sa'ud in 1964. A top-secret document in the Israeli State Archives reveals the existence of indirect contact in 1967 between King Husayn of Jordan, King Faisal, and Israel, through British agents, coordinating the prevention of Egyptian aircraft en route to Saudi Arabia from flying through Israeli and Jordanian airspace.<sup>29</sup>

King Faisal did not send troops to assist Egypt, Syria, or Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, both due to the conflict in Yemen and the war's brief duration.<sup>30</sup> After the war, he supported the resolutions of the Arab League summit that year in Khartoum, which expressed opposition to recognition of or negotiations with Israel, yet gave a green light to diplomatic action. Saudi Arabia did not formally recognize UN Resolution 242 for the simple reason that it did not play a role in the war. Faisal was unwilling to risk unnecessary criticism by publicly supporting a resolution that recognized Israel's existence, although he apparently welcomed the resolution in private.<sup>31</sup> It seems, therefore, that in the post-1967 period the Saudis joined the Arab consensus regarding full Israeli withdrawal from all the Occupied Territories, the return of the Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a Palestinian state, but they stopped short of calling for the destruction of Israel as demanded by radical Arab voices. This policy was consistent with Saudi Arabia's funding of Palestinian organizations at the time, giving money to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its leading, more moderate faction, Fatah, rather than the more radical factions like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, there is at least one report by a former senior Israeli intelligence official cryptically claiming that at the end of 1969 King Faisal delivered a message to Israel expressing interest in creating some form of dialogue in order to promote a settlement but that contact was not pursued by Saudi Arabia or Israel.<sup>33</sup> Such

28. Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948–1988* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 45. Bruce Riedel, who worked at the Central Intelligence Agency, claimed that there were indirect Saudi-Israeli contacts, see his "An Israeli-Saudi Axis? Not Likely," *Al-Monitor* (Lebanon), November 29, 2013, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/jerusalem-riyadh-axis-not-likely.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/jerusalem-riyadh-axis-not-likely.html). Archival material indicate that Israel did use the Saudi airspace, whether with Saudi knowledge or not. See cable from "T" to "Louis," April 14, 1964, Imperial War Museum, Johnson/Boyle Paper Box 64/89/3. Clive Jones — who wrote the authoritative account of the North Yemen Civil War, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* — insists that there was no indication of Saudi-Israeli connection.

29. Untitled page, February 26, 1967, Israeli State Archive (ISA), file 7437/1A.

30. Salamé, *السياسة الخارجية السعودية* [Saudi foreign policy], 550.

31. Based on David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud* (London: Pan Books, 1981), 283.

32. The exact amount of money Saudi Arabia gave to the PLO and Fatah in these years is unverifiable, but for some indication of the sums, see Elie Podeh, *עמדתה של ערב הסעודית כלפי הפלסטינים ומערכת*, ["The attitude of Saudi Arabia toward the Palestinians and its relations with the PLO, 1959–1982"] (M.A. thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1987), 45, 58, 209.

33. Nachik Navoth, *סיפורו של איש מוסד: תבל ומלוואה* [*One's Man Mossad*] (Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 2015), 55.

diplomatic pragmatism, however, was not reflected in the ideological sphere,<sup>34</sup> as Faisal was known to harbor anti-Semitic views.<sup>35</sup>

Incidentally, the 1967 war led to indirect economic collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Israel. With its occupation of the Golan Heights, Israel now controlled part of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), which transported oil from Dhahran in Saudi Arabia to the Zahrani River delta in Lebanon and had been deliberately constructed in the 1940s to circumvent Palestinian territory as per King 'Abd al-'Aziz's orders. The Tapline had been suspended due to the war but was renewed the following month. In coordination with the US, Israel permitted the flow of Saudi oil to Lebanon to continue, without demanding any royalty payments for the oil being transported through territory it controlled. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, oil continued to flow from the Arabian Peninsula on a more limited scale, and operations were never suspended entirely. After 1975, when the use of oil supertankers became more cost-effective due to the reopening of the Suez Canal and the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon, use of the Tapline dwindled and stopped altogether in 1982.<sup>36</sup> This relatively unknown episode is yet another illustration of Israeli-Saudi collaboration that was surreptitiously conducted at the convenience of both parties.

A US government cable from April 1973 indicates that Saudi intelligence chief Kamal Adham had told the US ambassador in Cairo that the Saudis did not regard eliminating Israel "as a legitimate aspiration,"<sup>37</sup> yet Saudi Arabia did play a role in the 1973 war. Although a token force of 1,000 Saudi soldiers stationed in Jordan was deployed in Syria in the last days of the war, the Saudi military itself did not fight.<sup>38</sup> However, Saudi Arabia was a full partner to the wartime oil embargo that was imposed on the US (and the West indirectly) with the aim of placing pressure on Israel by cutting oil exports by five percent per month. After the war, Faisal stated that the embargo would be lifted if the following conditions were met: total Israeli withdrawal from all the Occupied Territories; international recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination; and the affirmation of the Arab character of Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> In reality, however, the embargo was lifted in March 1974 without the fulfillment of any of these conditions.

34. Abadi, "Israel and Saudi Arabia," 55–56; Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Faysal: Saudi Arabia's King for All Seasons* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008), 161–62; John D. Ciorciari, "Saudi-U.S. Alignment after the Six-Day War," *MERIA Journal* 9, no. 2 (June 2005), [www.rubin-center.org/2005/06/ciorciari-2005-06-01/](http://www.rubin-center.org/2005/06/ciorciari-2005-06-01/).

35. King Faisal was notorious for handing anti-Semitic literature to visitors and journalists and for publicly praising Adolf Hitler's policies toward Jews; see Prittie and Nelson, *Economic War against the Jews*, 72; Edward R. F. Sheeran, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), 62–77.

36. Asher Kaufman, "Between Permeable and Sealed Borders: The Trans-Arabian Pipeline and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (Feb. 2014): 95–116. doi:10.1017/S002074381300130X.

37. US Interests Section, Cairo, to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, "The Future of the Palestinians," April 6, 1973, doc. no. 1973CAIRO01025\_b, published in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy*, April 7, 2013, [www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973CAIRO01025\\_b.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1973CAIRO01025_b.html).

38. Salamé, *السياسة الخارجية السعودية* [Saudi foreign policy], 551.

39. Holden and Jones, *House of Saud*, 345–46; Avraham Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Middle East Politics and the Quest for Regional Order* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 146. Based on his negotiations with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Faisal did indeed accept Israel's existence within the pre-1967 borders at this time; see Sheeran, *Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, 70–74.



When Jimmy Carter became president in January 1977, US policy was redirected toward reconvening an international conference to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. That summer, the Saudis were involved in pressuring the PLO to accept UN Resolution 242 as a prerequisite to their participation in the conference but to no avail. The Saudis also attempted to help restart the dormant Israeli-Egyptian negotiations, suspended after the two countries signed the Sinai Interim Agreement two years earlier. Within these efforts, King Faisal's brother and Saudi crown prince Fahd bin 'Abd al-'Aziz attempted to establish a covert line of communication with newly elected Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. The Israeli State Archives has a declassified four-page letter dating from late August of that year from an American using the name John Wallace Edwards to Ze'ev Sher, the Israeli economic attaché in New York, who was a close associate of Yehi'el Kadishai, Begin's personal secretary. The letter requests a meeting with Begin in order to deliver a message from Fahd with regard to the possibility of Israel signing treaties with both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This would have had the effect of weakening the Palestinian position and providing Israel with sought-after leverage over the US. The letter clarifies that arrangements would be made to privately explore Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat's reaction if Begin gave his consent. To dispel doubts as to its intention, the letter says that

it is precisely because this initiative is at variance with publicly (and many private) stated positions, [the Saudis] have decided to explore, via a trusted private route, the possibilities of reaching an agreement on certain matters. If the initial response of the Prime Minister is favorable and substantive the aim will be to set up private face-to-face meetings for direct negotiations at the highest level.

To placate a possibly anxious and confused Sher, the letter emphasizes that "this information may not be compatible with the Prime Minister's own evaluation of the Saudis nor be congruent with the Israeli intelligence services' perceptions . . . nevertheless it is accurate and real." It further reassures Sher that "it is not a diplomatic ploy to be used against Israel if the initiative is refused or not taken up by the Prime Minister or, if a beginning is made and it fails." The letter warns, however, that if the initiative would be revealed prematurely, "there is a degree of risk" to Fahd and others. It should be emphasized that the letter indicates that it was not the first attempt at contact by the Saudis, mentioning a Saudi memo dated November 15, 1976, given to Sher and that "its validity is very apt now."<sup>40</sup>

Though I have been unable to discover who John Wallace Edwards was, whether the letter was written pseudonymously, or if its author had credibility to speak for Fahd, the crown prince's attempt to establish a connection with Begin appears to be genuine since there was another attempt later in 1977. In December, Fahd sent a Palestinian emissary with contacts in Israel who was related to the royal house to deliver a secret message to Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan. However, Dayan insisted on receiving the message before meeting the messenger, something that the messenger refused

40. Edwards to Sher, private letter, August 30, 1977, ISA, file 7098/5a. No evidence has yet been found of the November 1976 memo.

to do.<sup>41</sup> These two episodes, which occurred within six months of each other, indicate a pattern in Saudi policy of attempting to establish direct covert contact with Israel, but being repeatedly rebuffed by Israel for no apparent reason.

### *SAUDI INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS*

In August 1981, Crown Prince Fahd announced an eight-point peace initiative. It was the first time that Saudi Arabia had been actively involved in proposing an initiative to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Taking into account Fahd's previous covert attempts to reach out to Israel, perhaps the initiative should not be seen as a surprise. The initiative's main points were Israeli withdrawal from all the territories conquered in 1967 including East Jerusalem, evacuation of all Jewish settlements in the territories, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Israel or for compensation, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The main element concerning Israel, which elicited Arab objections, was clause 7, which stated that "all states in the region should be able to live in peace" — a wording that implied indirect recognition of Israel.<sup>42</sup> The significance of the Fahd Initiative lay in that it was the first instance in which the kingdom expressed its traditional view in public rather than behind the scenes.<sup>43</sup>

The Fahd Initiative was a result of the new confidence gained following the oil boom that turned Saudi Arabia into a regional economic power. Following Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League and Iraq's preoccupation with the Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia attempted to fill the leadership vacuum. The Fahd Initiative had also been meant to incentive the US Senate to approve President Ronald Reagan's June 1981 decision to sell Saudi Arabia aircraft equipped with the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS).<sup>44</sup> However, the sale of this sophisticated weaponry to Saudi Arabia both infuriated and alarmed Israel, further alienating it from the kingdom.

The Fahd Initiative did not impress Israeli leaders; some considered it "a plot to destroy Israel's existence." Begin's government opposed the initiative because it contradicted the Likud's ideology and threatened to undermine the Egyptian-Israeli peace process. The opposition Labor Party, headed by Shimon Peres, also dismissed the initiative, and only the left-wing parties expressed some support. Neither did the US demonstrate any enthusiasm.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the dialogue regarding the initiative was revived following Egyptian president Sadat's assassination in October 1981; Israel was particularly concerned about a change in the US position, which now considered

41. Rafi Sitton, ההחמצות הגדולות: הזדמנויות מדיניות ויוזמות לשלום שישראל ההמיצה [The major misses: Political opportunities and peace initiatives that Israel missed] (Or Yehuda, Israel: Ma'ariv, 1994), 119–22; interview by the author with Sitton, September 10, 2017, Modi'in, Israel.

42. Elie Podeh, "From Fahd to 'Abdallah: The Origins of the Saudi Peace Initiatives and Their Impact on the Arab System and Israel," Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Gitelson Peace Publication no. 24 (July 2003): 41.

43. See R. D. Lamb to Foreign Office, "Saudi Attitude to Recognition of Israel," January 10, 1982, Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 93, 3249/1.

44. Podeh, "From Fahd to 'Abdallah," 3–7. On the struggle of the pro-Israel lobby against the sale, see Nicholas Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia: The Reagan Administration and the Balancing of America's Competing Interests in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

45. Podeh, "From Fahd to 'Abdallah," 11–13.

the initiative a possible basis for negotiations. Israel, however, continued to view the initiative as a “sophisticated and rational method for Israel’s complete annihilation.” Moreover, Begin dismissed Saudi Arabia’s credibility, citing the kingdom as “a desert petro-dollar state, where the darkness of the Middle Ages still exists, with the amputation of hands and heads, with unheard of corruption.”<sup>46</sup> Israel was, therefore, much relieved when the Arab League Summit in Fez, Morocco, torpedoed the Fahd Initiative in late November 1981.

However, the results of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon (June–September 1982) gave impetus to renewed attempts to revive the deadlocked Arab-Israeli peace process. This led to the launching in September 1982 of both the Reagan Plan and a modification of the Fahd Initiative, now endorsed by the Arab League. This amended Fahd Initiative, termed the Arab Peace Plan, not only designated the PLO as “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” but modified the wording of the controversial seventh clause, making the recognition of Israel even more vague.<sup>47</sup> Israel’s immediate rejection of the Arab Peace Plan sealed its fate.<sup>48</sup> Despite Israeli refusal to deal with the Saudi-led plan, it marked a watershed in Saudi Arabia’s attitude toward Israel.

Incidentally, in September 1981, a month after the publication of the Fahd Initiative, indirect secret diplomatic exchanges took place between Israel and Saudi Arabia through the US. When an Israeli missile boat ran aground on Saudi shores as a result of technical malfunction and human error, Israel asked the US to assure the Saudis that the incident was not a hostile act and to obtain permission to extricate the vessel and its sailors without Saudi interference. The Saudis consented on the condition that the rescue operation would remain secret until concluded, and that Israel would not use heavy equipment. These contacts, which were held in complete secrecy, helped overcome the crisis.<sup>49</sup>

During the 1990/91 Gulf War, both Saudi Arabia and Israel found themselves threatened and attacked by a common enemy — Iraq’s Saddam Husayn. US Secretary of State James Baker became the channel through which the two countries exchanged ideas. Although the Saudis refused to allow Israel to fly over their airspace to undertake a preventive strike against Iraq, Baker recalled Fahd (who had become king in June 1982) assuring him that “he would remain stalwart if Israel struck back after being attacked first by Saddam.”<sup>50</sup> The US commander of the operation, General Norman

46. דברי הכנסת [Knesset Plenary Records], 10th Knesset, 14th Sess. (1981).

47. Whereas the original seventh clause read that “all states in the region should be able to live in peace,” it was changed to: “The drawing up by the Security Council guarantees for peace for all the states of the region, including the independent Palestinian state.” See Podeh, “From Fahd to ‘Abdallah,” 17–18, 41.

48. Elie Podeh, *Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 157–72.

49. Uriah Canaff, “How an Israeli Missile Boat Ran Aground the Hostile Saudi Shore,” *Haaretz*, April 16, 2016, [www.haaretz.com/1.5433653](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5433653). Indeed, the Israeli military censored all information on the incident for two weeks, long after the operation was complete. For a short analysis of the episode, mainly from an Israeli point of view, see Mike Eldar, שייטת 11: הקרב על הצל”ש [Flotilla 11: The battle for citation] (Tel Aviv: Ma’ariv, 1996), 185–97; Zeev Almog, הפלגות חיי: מפקד שייטת 13: הפלגות חיי [Commander of Flotilla 13: The sails of my life] (Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 2014), 1,213–21; interview by the author with former Israeli Air Force commander David ‘Ivri, May 31, 2018, Tel Aviv.

50. James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 387.

Schwarzkopf, received assurances from Fahd that if Israel were to defend itself, “the Saudi armed forces would still fight by our side.” In Schwarzkopf’s opinion, this was “an act of extraordinary courage and leadership” on Fahd’s part.<sup>51</sup> The Israelis were not privy to this information.<sup>52</sup>

Baker recalled Fahd confiding in him after the war that, “if a homeland could be found for the Palestinians, he was prepared to approve full economic and diplomatic relations with Israel.”<sup>53</sup> On another occasion, the Saudis issued a statement to the effect that they would suspend their economic boycott of Israel if it ceased its settlement activities in the Occupied Territories, but the government of right-wing prime minister Yitzhak Shamir refused to stop the settlement activity on ideological grounds, no matter the cost.<sup>54</sup> It seems, therefore, that the Gulf War constituted another turning point in Saudi thinking toward Israel, now seen as a possible partner in the Middle East balance of power.

Following the war, after some hesitation and American prodding, the Saudis announced that the opening session of Madrid Peace Conference in late October 1991 would be attended by an observer from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which Saudi Arabia is part. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to the US, was chosen as the GCC representative.<sup>55</sup> It was the first formal public meeting of Israeli and Saudi officials, followed by informal meeting at the State Department.<sup>56</sup> Later, Uri Savir, director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met Bandar in Washington, DC.<sup>57</sup> When Saudi Arabia took part in the multilateral talks a few months following the conference, in 1992, Israeli deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin met his Saudi counterpart. Most of the meetings were held in plenary sessions, yet Beilin recounted that he once met the Saudi representative in private, in 1994, in Canada. In this talk, Beilin raised the issue of Saudi Arabia’s constant refusal to participate in various environmental, agricultural, and other regional projects proposed by Israel but did not receive a satisfactory response.<sup>58</sup>

During the Oslo years (1993–2000), Saudi Arabia quietly supported peace negotiations. Moreover, Saudi grand mufti Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bin Baz issued a fatwa in support of signing peace agreements with Israel based on the legal precedent of the Treaty of Hudaibiyya in 628 CE, in which the Prophet Muhammad entered into a 10-year truce with Mecca under control of the then-polytheistic Quraysh tribal leadership. Bin Baz also issued a fatwa that allowed Muslims to pray at al-Aqsa Mosque under oc-

51. H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 373.

52. At least, according to Israel’s defense minister at the time, Moshe Arens, see his למען בטחון ישראל [In Defense of Israel: A Memoir of a Political Life] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim, 2018), 196.

53. Baker with DeFrank, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 418–19.

54. Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation*, 43.

55. Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 450–60.

56. Interview with Israeli foreign ministry secretary-general Eytan Bentsur, May 31, 2018, Tel Aviv.

57. Ben Caspit, “אתה לא מבין את המצב האמיתי,” [“You do not understand the real situation”], *Makor Rishon* (Israel), March 1, 2002, [www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/archive/ART/255/691.html](http://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/archive/ART/255/691.html).

58. Interview by the author with Yossi Beilin, January 11, 2018, Tel Aviv. On Saudi Arabia’s minor role in the multilateral negotiations, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Beyond the Handshake: Multilateral Cooperation in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, 1991–1996* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 57; Abadi, “Israel and Saudi Arabia,” 60–61.

cupation.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the Saudis were involved behind the scenes in the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.<sup>60</sup> The change in the Saudi position was solidified in a decision, made under the facade of the GCC in October 1994, to cancel the indirect economic boycott on Israeli companies (i.e., the second- and third-level boycotts and not the primary, direct one).<sup>61</sup>

Another shift occurred in the Saudi position in February 2002, when King Fahd's brother, Crown Prince 'Abdullah (who had been serving as regent since the king's 1995 stroke) presented a new initiative that offered full normalization of relations between the Arab states and Israel in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from the entire Occupied Territories. The main Saudi motive for launching the new initiative was to improve its image in the US and the West following the involvement of 15 Saudi hijackers (and the Saudi citizenship of al-Qa'ida leader Usama Bin Ladin) in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. No less important was the desire to contain the Second Intifada, the Palestinian uprising that had begun in 2000, which was causing instability throughout the Middle East.<sup>62</sup>

Israel did not officially respond to the new Saudi initiative, although Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon attempted to learn about it through several channels: Jewish-American billionaire S. Daniel Abraham; 'Adil al-Jubayr, Crown Prince 'Abdullah's foreign policy adviser; and Andrey Vdovin, Russia's special envoy to the Middle East, who had served as an ambassador in Riyadh.<sup>63</sup> In late March 2002, the Arab League endorsed what became known as the Arab Peace Initiative (API), based on Crown Prince 'Abdullah's proposal but with certain modifications. The API demanded full Israeli withdrawal from all territories — explicitly including not only the Golan Heights, which Israel had annexed, but the small border areas that Lebanon claimed were still being occupied by Israel (i.e., the Shab'a Farms and Ghajar) — and Israel's acceptance of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, in return for the establishment of normal relations of the Arab states with Israel in the context of comprehensive peace. With regard to the Palestinian refugees, it was stated that "a just solution" would have "to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194." This ambiguous phrasing was the product of extensive deliberations seeking a formula that would allay Israeli fears of full implementation of the Palestinian maximalist demand for an unrestricted right of return.<sup>64</sup> In return, the Arab states offered to "consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states in the region."<sup>65</sup>

The API's publication coincided with several large-scale attacks in Israel by the hard-line Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine (Hamas). Compelled to retaliate,

59. Yitzhak Reiter, *War, Peace and International Relations in Islam: Muslim Scholars on Peace Accords with Israel* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 120–34.

60. Podeh, *Chances for Peace*, 263, 290.

61. Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation*, 54; Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2015): 132, doi:10.1080/13537121.2014.984424.

62. Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative," 586.

63. Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative," 586–87.

64. Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative," 588–89; Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 120–28.

65. Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative," 588.

Israel launched a military operation against the Palestinian Authority (PA), aimed at uprooting the infrastructure for funding these attacks and isolating PA president Yasir 'Arafat. In this climate of violence, Israeli silence regarding the API was understandable. However, the truth was that Sharon had no motivation to respond to the Saudi overture, as making territorial concessions contradicted his hawkish worldview. When he visited the US in May 2002, he brought a dossier of documents that had been seized during the military operation, which showed Saudi financial support for Hamas and its suicide bombers' families.<sup>66</sup> Sharon's efforts were designed to undermine Saudi credibility as a US ally and possible peace partner.

### WARMING RELATIONS:

#### THE 2006 LEBANON WAR AND THE IRANIAN THREAT

Iran had posed a political and ideological challenge to Saudi Arabia ever since the 1979 revolution. Politically, the new Iranian regime had attempted to achieve hegemony in the Persian Gulf, if not in the whole Middle East. Ideologically, Iran's Shi'ism is not recognized as a legitimate religious sect by the Wahhabi school that has been in alliance with the Saudi royal family since its founding by 18th century Sunni cleric Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab. As a result, Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries financially supported Iraq during its war with Iran. Saudi-Iranian relations further deteriorated following the US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Husayn's regime in 2003, leading to the rise of a Shi'i-dominated regime and creating a power vacuum in the Gulf, which Iran was quick to fill. When Jordan's King 'Abdullah II warned in 2004 of a possible Shi'i "crescent" stretching from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria,<sup>67</sup> he found a receptive ear in Saudi Arabia. Saudi fears increased when Mahmud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, and Iran adopted a more activist policy in the region.<sup>68</sup>

The continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in Saudi eyes, exacerbated Arab divisions, which Iran exploited. Thus, when war broke out between Israel and the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'i organization Hizbullah (literally, "the party of God") in the summer of 2006, Saudi Arabia attacked the organization for its reckless and irresponsible behavior and its bringing calamity on Lebanon.<sup>69</sup> A top Saudi religious authority stated that Hizbullah operations were religiously illegal and that a temporary peaceful settlement, on the lines of the Treaty of Hdaybiyya, should be signed with "the Jews."<sup>70</sup> The media tug-of-war conducted between Iran and its proxies, on the one hand,

66. A month earlier, a book on the issue had been published by former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Dore Gold, who was close to the Sharon government; see *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 198–203.

67. Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2004, <https://wapo.st/2zOqP3s>.

68. Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 100–110.

69. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Press Agency, "Official Source Makes Statement," July 14, 2006, [www.spa.gov.sa/375383](http://www.spa.gov.sa/375383).

70. 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Ubaykan, "ولا تلقوا بأيديكم إلى التهلكة!" ["And cast not yourselves by your own hands into destruction!"], *Asharq Al-Awsat* (UK), July 27, 2006, <http://cms.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=375028&issueno=10103>.

and “moderate” Sunni Arab countries, on the other, exposed that Israel and Saudi Arabia stood on the same side of the fence. Close scrutiny of diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks shows that Saudi Arabia was in a state of panic regarding Iran’s regional ambitions. In 2008, for example, one cable has ‘Adil al-Jubayr quoting ‘Abdullah (who had become king after Fahd’s 2005 passing) as having said that the US should “cut off the head of the snake” and curtail Iran’s influence in Iraq.<sup>71</sup> Israel and Saudi Arabia’s tacit alliance was therefore a result of security balance-of-power calculations, which reflected their mutual interests in the region. If, before the war, Arab leaders expressed their concerns about Iran’s expansionist policy only behind closed doors, they were now willing to openly admit their desire to see Israel cause a painful blow to Hizbullah so as to damage Iranian prestige.<sup>72</sup>

According to an *Intelligence Online* report, one of the outcomes of the 2006 Lebanon War was the decision to “build up and accelerate intelligence exchanges” between Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. For that purpose, in September 2006, Meir Dagan, head of the Mossad (“institute,” referring to *ha-Mosad le-Modi‘in u-le-Tafkidim Meyuhadim*, the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations), met in ‘Amman with his Jordanian counterpart and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador to the US who had become head of the Saudi National Security Council.<sup>73</sup> Dagan was among the first in Israel — perhaps even before the war — to fully recognize the implications of the changes in the regional balance of threats, which led him to focus on developing secret relations with countries in the Arab world that did not have diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>74</sup>

Developments on the Iranian front were not unconnected to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It was not a surprise that Israel resumed its public diplomacy with regard to the API: in November 2006, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert extended an invitation to PA president Mahmud ‘Abbas to hold a “real, open, genuine, and serious dialogue.” He promised to seek the assistance of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states to advance this goal.<sup>75</sup> The timing was not coincidental; in March 2007, shortly before the Arab League convened in Riyadh, Olmert reiterated his praise of the Saudi initiative and of King ‘Abdullah’s leadership qualities and personality. The Israeli premier even

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71. US Embassy, Riyadh, to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, “Saudi King Abdallah and Senior Princes on Saudi Policy toward Iraq,” April 20, 2008, doc. no. 08RIYADH649\_a, published in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy*, November 28, 2010, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html).

72. Yossi Melman, “Iran’s Response to Second Lebanon War Is Israel’s Gain,” *Haaretz*, July 17, 2011, [www.haaretz.com/1.5029574](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5029574). For some harsh Saudi statements against Hizbullah, see Rubin, *Islam in the Balance*, 111.

73. “A Secret Regional Alliance against Iran,” *Intelligence Online* (France), October 20, 2006, [www.intelligenceonline.com/political-intelligence/2006/10/20/a-secret-regional-alliance-against-iran,23406406-eve](http://www.intelligenceonline.com/political-intelligence/2006/10/20/a-secret-regional-alliance-against-iran,23406406-eve). According to other reports, it was Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who met Bandar; see Podeh, “Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative,” 592–93.

74. David Meidan, interviewed in סיפור כסיי: המוסד: [The Mossad: Imperfect Spies], “אין גבול” [“There is no limit”], episode 4, HOT 8 (Israel), June 24, 2017, available on YouTube at [https://youtu.be/xgfg\\_yyPe5Y](https://youtu.be/xgfg_yyPe5Y).

75. State of Israel, Prime Minister’s Office, “Address by PM Olmert: Memorial Ceremony for David and Paula Ben-Gurion (Translation)” November 27, 2006, available at the Internet Archive, Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070818003846/http://www.pmo.gov.il:80/PMO-Eng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speechdavid271106.htm> (August 18, 2007).

boasted that “there is a real chance that in the next five years Israel will be able to reach a peace settlement with its enemies,” adding that “things that did not happen before are now taking place and ripening. We need to exploit this opportunity and to leverage it wisely and with responsibility.”<sup>76</sup>

Olmert’s expectations were soon dashed when he was forced to resign in July 2008 amid charges of corruption. However, Shimon Peres, who had become Israel’s president, declared that the “three noes” of the 1967 Arab League Summit in Khartoum had been replaced by an Arab peace plan, and called on the Saudi king to continue to promote the initiative in order to help bring about a comprehensive peace. Peres also invited Arab leaders to come to Jerusalem to initiate a peaceful dialogue. Saudi foreign minister Prince Sa‘ud al-Faisal stated that Peres’s support of the API was “better late than never,” and expressed the hope that the next Israeli prime minister would adopt the initiative.<sup>77</sup>

Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister since March 2009, shared Saudi concerns over the Iranian threat, particularly its quest for nuclear capability. This stood in sharp contrast to the differences Netanyahu had with the Saudis over the API and the peace process with the Palestinians. But still, in light of what both parties considered to be a feeble American response to the Iranian challenge, they continued to cooperate. Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky described this relationship as a “tacit security regime,” characterized by the existence of an unwritten and uncodified cooperation based on shared perceptions of an Iranian threat.<sup>78</sup> Yet, another basic feature of this regime was its secrecy. Although very little is known about the actual cooperation between the two countries, press reports and documents released by WikiLeaks offer some indications, including secret meetings in 2010 between Dagan and Saudi officials in Saudi Arabia. In these meetings, the Saudis reportedly agreed to permit Israel to use Saudi airspace and to assist in a theoretical strike against Iran by cooperating on issues related to drones, rescue helicopters, and tanker planes.<sup>79</sup> In an interview for this article, former prime minister Ehud Olmert commented that “Saudi Arabia sees Israel as a serious potential partner both militarily and economically,” adding that “there were [even] more extraordinary things” going on than Dagan’s 2010 visit to Saudi Arabia.<sup>80</sup>

76. Quoted in Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer, “שנה שהחמיצה” [“A missed year”], *Yedi‘ot Aharonot* (Israel), August 18, 2007, 2–5.

77. Quoted in Yoav Stern, “הנשיא יבקר במצרים — לראשונה זה 12 שנה” [“For the first time in 12 years — the president will visit Egypt”], *Haaretz*, October 22, 2008, 2.

78. Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, “Israel’s Relations with the Gulf States: Toward the Emergence of a Tacit Security Regime?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 38, no. 3 (2017): 398–419. doi: 10.1080/13523260.2017.1292375.

79. Uzi Mahnaimi and Sarah Baxter, “Saudis Give Nod to Israeli Raid on Iran,” *The Times* (UK), July 5, 2009, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudis-give-nod-to-israeli-raid-on-iran-qp2blhgk36c](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudis-give-nod-to-israeli-raid-on-iran-qp2blhgk36c); “Saudi Arabia Gives Israel Clear Skies to Attack Iranian Nuclear Sites,” *The Times*, June 12, 2010, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudi-arabia-gives-israel-clear-skies-to-attack-iranian-nuclear-sites-2x0mgqb7xj3](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudi-arabia-gives-israel-clear-skies-to-attack-iranian-nuclear-sites-2x0mgqb7xj3). Israeli and Saudi officials denied this report. On Israeli-Saudi intelligence cooperation regarding Iran, see David E. Sanger, “Saudi Arabia and Israel Share a Common Opposition,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2O6xcYv>. On Dagan’s visit, see Anshel Pfeffer, “Mossad Chief Reportedly Visited Saudi Arabia for Talks on Iran,” *Haaretz*, July 26, 2010, [www.haaretz.com/1.5152341](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5152341); Barak Ravid, “WikiLeaks Blows Cover Off Israel’s Covert Gulf States Ties,” *Haaretz*, November 29, 2010, [www.haaretz.com/1.5146634](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5146634).

80. Interview, June 3, 2018, Tel Aviv.



When an agreement to curtail Iran's nuclear program was signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany in April 2015, both Israel and Saudi Arabia felt betrayed by the administration of US president Barack Obama and did not conceal their criticism of the agreement's details. Their main concern was that Iran would use its improved financial situation — as a result of the removal of the economic sanctions — to support what they considered to be terrorist elements in the region and would continue to secretly pursue its nuclear program.<sup>81</sup> A typical assessment of political analysts was that one of the results of the agreement was “the confluence of Israel with those of some Arab countries who see ‘a nuclear Iran’ as the greatest danger to their influence and perhaps their existence.”<sup>82</sup> It was therefore no surprise that Netanyahu's defiant speech to the US Congress in March 2015, expressing Israeli opposition to the emerging deal, was met with applause by many in Saudi Arabia,<sup>83</sup> as Netanyahu said in public what Saudis were saying in secret.

The Shi'i/Iranian threat also affected Saudi policy on Yemen, where the Iranian-backed Zaydi Shi'i revivalist movement Ansar Allah (“supporters of God”) — known as the Huthis after founder Shaykh Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi — ousted President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and took over Sana'a. In response, Saudi Arabia, with the United Arab Emirates, led a military intervention in March 2015, aiming to safeguard what it considered its sphere of influence. Israel reportedly expressed willingness to respond favorably to a GCC request to sell its Iron Dome missile defense technology.<sup>84</sup> True or not, this offer followed the same logic that led Israel to help the Yemeni royalists in the 1960s, backed by Saudi Arabia, against the Nasserist threat.

Press reports and interviews with leading Israeli officials confirm that Israel and Saudi Arabia cooperated secretly against their common enemies in the Middle East, although the extent and scope of this cooperation remains highly classified. Yet, the joint understandings go beyond these mutual regional defense interests; when the new Saudi king, Salman, visited Egypt in April 2016, President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi declared that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir would return to Saudi sovereignty after the conclusion of the lease period that began in 1950. When this declaration aroused concern in Israeli media, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon stated that Saudi Arabia gave Israel assurances regarding freedom of passage in the Straits of Tiran.<sup>85</sup> A few months earlier, a senior Saudi official had allegedly participated in a secret summit in 'Aqaba, Jordan,

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81. For a summary of press reactions from the Gulf at the time, see “In Gulf Press, Fear and Criticism of Iran Nuclear Agreement: Obama Is Leaving the Middle East a Legacy of Disaster,” MEMRI, Special Dispatch no. 6107 (July 15, 2015). [www.memri.org/reports/gulf-press-fear-and-criticism-iran-nuclear-agreement-obama-leaving-middle-east-legacy](http://www.memri.org/reports/gulf-press-fear-and-criticism-iran-nuclear-agreement-obama-leaving-middle-east-legacy).

82. From an editorial in *al-Quds al-'Arabi* (UK), quoted in “In Gulf Press,” MEMRI.

83. “Netanyahu's Congress Speech Draws Praise in Saudi Arabia, Derision in West,” *Haaretz*, March 4, 2015, [www.haaretz.com/1.645338](http://www.haaretz.com/1.645338).

84. David A. Graham, “Israel and Saudi Arabia: Togetherish at Last?” *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/israeli-saudi-relations/395015/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/israeli-saudi-relations/395015/); “Report: Gulf States to Purchase Israel's Iron Dome System,” *Haaretz*, October 14, 2015, [www.haaretz.com/1.5408711](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5408711).

85. Gili Cohen, “Israel: Saudi Arabia Gave Written Assurances over Freedom of Passage in Tiran Straits,” *Haaretz*, April 12, 2016, [www.haaretz.com/1.5430378](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5430378); interview, Ya'alon, May 2017, Tel Aviv.

with US Secretary of State John Kerry, Sisi, ‘Abdullah II, and Netanyahu.<sup>86</sup> *Intelligence Online* reported that “there has never been such active cooperation between the two countries [i.e., Israel and Saudi Arabia], in terms of analysis, human intelligence and interception on Iran and movements loyal to it . . .”<sup>87</sup>

With the designation of King Salman’s son Muhammad as crown prince in June 2017, the change in the official Saudi attitude toward Israel became even more pronounced and open. In a highly publicized April 2018 interview, he recognized Israel and equated Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei to Adolf Hitler.<sup>88</sup> According to *Intelligence Online*, Israeli, Jordanian, Egyptian, Saudi, and Palestinian heads of intelligence held a security summit on Israeli-Palestinian issues in ‘Aqaba, in June 2018, which was attended by US envoys Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt.<sup>89</sup> Admittedly, already in 2016 there were indications of an improved climate in Saudi media with respect to Israel, with the launching of a campaign to combat anti-Semitism. In addition, local journalists began publishing favorable articles on Israel or pieces critical of the Palestinians.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, all these reports signaled that, short of diplomatic relations, Israel and Saudi Arabia possess many of the features of “normal relations.”

### GROWING INDIRECT POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TIES

Another track of unofficial contacts involved Saudis who acted as intermediaries between Israelis and Palestinians or other Arab states. For example, Saudi tycoon ‘Adnan Khashoggi was rumored to have been involved in various deals that bypassed the Arab boycott, for which he was handsomely compensated.<sup>91</sup> He also played a role in 1985 in contacts involving Israeli prime minister Peres and PLO chairman ‘Arafat.

86. Details of the summit were revealed a year later, probably by Kerry. See Barak Ravid, “Kerry Offered Netanyahu Regional Peace Plan in Secret 2016 Summit with al-Sissi, King Abdullah,” *Haaretz*, February 19, 2017, [www.haaretz.com/1.5437934](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5437934).

87. “GIP Leads Pack in Cooperation with Israel,” *Intelligence Online*, October 12, 2016, [www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence\\_organizations/2016/10/12/gip-leads-pack-in-cooperation-with-israel,108185028-gra](http://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence_organizations/2016/10/12/gip-leads-pack-in-cooperation-with-israel,108185028-gra). This was also reported by the usually reliable Saudi anonymous source known by the Twitter handle @mujtahidd, see Asma al-‘Utaybi, “«مجتهد»: إسرائيل لم ترغب في «استهداف» حسن نصر الله» بعد أن حدد جاسوسها موقعه [Hasan Nasrallah after its spies determined his location]”, *New Khalij* (Saudi Arabia), December 28, 2014, <https://thenewkhalij.news/ar/node/7607>.

88. Jeffrey Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good,’” *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/).

89. “In Aqaba, Palestine Spymaster Plays Trump Card,” *Intelligence Online*, June 27, 2018, [www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2018/06/27/in-aqaba-palestine-spymaster-plays-trump-card,108314911-art](http://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2018/06/27/in-aqaba-palestine-spymaster-plays-trump-card,108314911-art).

90. “Some in Saudi Media Criticize Anti-Semitism, Warm up to Israel,” *Times of Israel*, August 12, 2016. [www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-media-battles-anti-semitism-warms-up-to-israel/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-media-battles-anti-semitism-warms-up-to-israel/); Z. Harel, “Shift in Saudi Media’s Attitude to Israel. Part I: Saudi Writers, Intellectuals — Iran Is More Dangerous than Israel; Peace with It Is Vital in Order to Repel Iranian Threat,” MEMRI, Inquiry and Analysis Series no. 1398 (May 29, 2018). [www.memri.org/reports/shift-saudi-medias-attitude-israel—part-i-saudi-writers-intellectuals-iran-more-dangerous](http://www.memri.org/reports/shift-saudi-medias-attitude-israel—part-i-saudi-writers-intellectuals-iran-more-dangerous).

91. Prittie and Nelson, *Economic War against the Jews*, 99.

Khashoggi later played a crucial role in what became known as the controversial Iran-Contra arms deal, which also involved Israelis and Americans.<sup>92</sup> The most influential intermediary was Prince Bandar bin Sultan who served as the Saudi ambassador in Washington for 22 years (1983–2005). Bandar was rumored to host Israeli officials at his ranch in the 1980s.<sup>93</sup> Even before he became ambassador, as military attaché, in September 1982, Bandar played the role of messenger in the agreement between the PLO and the US — and indirectly with Israel — regarding the evacuation of Palestinian guerrilla fighters from Beirut.<sup>94</sup> In 1985/86, he played a crucial role in the Saudi purchase of missiles from China, after the US Congress rebuffed a Saudi request. Bandar made several secret trips to China in an attempt to obtain Dongfeng CSS-2 missiles. News of the deal was leaked in US media. The Israelis were concerned that these missiles were capable of reaching any part of the Middle East with nuclear warheads. An Israeli official even threatened to attack the Saudi site if the US failed to deal with the problem. To back its threat, the Israeli Air Force initiated maneuvers that suggested that it might be preparing to strike. Upon learning of the Israeli maneuvers, Bandar was instructed to inform to Israel — through US national security advisor Colin Powell — that Saudi Arabia had no incentive to fight but would have no option but to retaliate if attacked. Although Israel was unwilling to commit not to attack the Saudi missile site, the Saudi-Israeli messages — delivered by Bandar, the US, and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak — eventually defused the crisis. David Ottaway, Bandar's biographer, concluded that the event "brought Saudi Arabia to the brink of war with Israel, or at least the closest the two nations have ever come to open hostilities,"<sup>95</sup> but in hindsight it seems that war was not a viable option. Eventually, the US received guarantees from both the Chinese and Saudis that the missiles would never be armed with nuclear or chemical warheads.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, Bandar was known for his close connections with Jewish leaders in the US. According to one report, he secretly met American Jewish leaders at least 10 times. In summer 1991, Bandar reportedly informed leaders of the American Jewish Congress that once a peaceful solution between Israel and the Palestinians was reached, Saudi Arabia would formally recognize Israel.<sup>97</sup> Recognizing the influence of the American Jewish community on US foreign policy, Bandar sought to keep open a channel of communications with community leaders and, through them, to also maintain indirect contact with Israel.

92. Lally Weymouth, "Khashoggi Speaks," *Washington Post*, February 1, 1987, <https://wapo.st/2yb5yyY>.

93. "The New Frenemies," *The Economist*, June 11, 2015, <https://econ.st/2xXWWfu>. See also Udi Dekel and Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: Is the Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?" Institute for National Security Studies, INSS Insight no. 500 (December 22, 2013), [www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-and-saudi-arabia-is-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-my-friend/](http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-and-saudi-arabia-is-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-my-friend/).

94. David B. Ottaway, *The King's Messenger: Prince Bandar bin Sultan and America's Tangled Relationship with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008), 58–59.

95. Ottaway, *King's Messenger*, 69. See also the memoir of the Saudi officer responsible for the purchase of the missiles, Khaled Ben Sultan with Patrick Seale, *Guerrier du désert: Une vision personnelle de la guerre du Golfe par le chef du commandement unifié [Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander]*, trans. Serge Wojciekowski (Paris: Hachette, 1995), 149–50; Abadi, "Israel and Saudi Arabia," 59–60.

96. Ottaway, *King's Messenger*, 74.

97. Abadi, "Israel and Saudi Arabia," 68, 71.

Later, Bandar would play an even more proactive role in Israeli-Arab relations. The fact that he enjoyed the trust of US presidents made him an effective messenger. Such was the case when President Bill Clinton sent him to deliver a message to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad from Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak in a last-ditch effort to strike an Israeli-Syrian peace deal. Bandar's successful trip to Damascus paved the way for Clinton's meeting with Asad in Geneva in March 2000, but Barak backed off from the negotiations at the last moment.<sup>98</sup> In December 2000, five months after the failure of Israeli-Palestinian final status negotiations at the Camp David Summit, Clinton once more called on Bandar to press 'Arafat to accept his broad outline for an agreement but to no avail. Bandar was highly critical of 'Arafat, describing the PA president's negative position to the so-called Clinton Parameters as "a crime."<sup>99</sup> Bandar reportedly continued meeting high-ranking Israeli officials to discuss mutual regional concerns.<sup>100</sup> His known connections with Israel earned him some critics in the Arab world,<sup>101</sup> but the fact that he was close to the Saudi royal court and continued in his role as messenger indicated that he was not operating at his own behest.

Since 2008, numerous Israeli-Saudi track-two diplomatic meetings have taken place involving high-ranking officials. The most senior Saudi official involved was Prince Turki al-Faisal, who served as the director-general of intelligence from 1977 to 2001, as Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom from 2003 to 2005, and as Saudi ambassador to the US from 2005 to 2006. As son of King Faisal and brother of longtime foreign minister Sa'ud al-Faisal, Turki is part of the Saudi royal elite in spite of his 2007 retirement. In 2008, together with Israeli academic scholars and former officials, Turki attended an academic conference hosted by the Oxford Research Group on how to promote the API. Since then, a long list of Israelis has met with Turki. On at least three occasions, Turki's meetings with Israelis created a public furor: in July 2010, with Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon; in May 2014, with former Military Intelligence chief 'Amos Yadlin; and in May 2016, with former National Security Council head Ya'akov 'Amidror. In order to respond to his critics, before his meeting with Yadlin, Turki published an article justifying his behavior on political and religious grounds.<sup>102</sup> He also made himself available to Israeli media, appearing in several interviews and contributing an article on the importance of the API to the respected Israeli daily *Haaretz*.<sup>103</sup>

98. On this episode, see William Simpson, *The Prince: The Secret Story of the World's Most Intriguing Royal Prince Bandar bin Sultan* (New York: Regan, 2006), 303–4; Podeh, *Chances for Peace*, 263.

99. Elsa Walsh, "The Prince," *New Yorker*, March 24, 2003, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/24/the-prince-3](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/24/the-prince-3).

100. "Whistleblower Reveals Prince Bandar's Secret Meetings with Israelis in Geneva," Fars News Agency (Iran), December 8, 2013, <https://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920917001462>. Although the source is Iranian, it is based on information from the Saudi Twitter source @mujtahidd.

101. For example, see Sharmine Narwani, "Bandar ibn Israel," *al-Akhbar English* (Lebanon), August 28, 2013, <https://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16845>.

102. Turki al-Faisal, "من دافوس . . . إلى ميونخ" ["From Davos . . . to Munich"], *Al-Riyadh*, February 13, 2014, 2.

103. Turki al-Faisal, "Peace Would Be Possible with the Arab Peace Initiative at Its Core," *Haaretz*, July 7, 2014, [www.haaretz.com/1.5252054](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5252054); Akiva Eldar, "Israel Should Take Prince Turki's Offer on Arab Peace Initiative," *Al-Monitor*, May 29, 2014, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/prince-al-faisal-amos-yadlin-meeting-israel-arab-peace-initiative.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/prince-al-faisal-amos-yadlin-meeting-israel-arab-peace-initiative.html); Chemi Shalev, "Saudi Prince al-Faisal Tells Haaretz: Desire for Peace Exists Both in Gaza and Ramallah," *Haaretz*, November 10, 2015, [www.haaretz.com/1.5420072](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5420072).

The most widely covered of these track-two meetings was between former Saudi general Anwar Eshki, head of the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies in Jidda, and former Israeli ambassador to the UN Dore Gold, who was head of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs think tank and was just about to be nominated as director general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The event — the culmination of a series of five meetings held since 2014 — was held at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington in June 2015. In his address, Eshki spoke at length of Iran's hostile and aggressive actions in the region and signaled that peace with Israel, based on the Saudi-led API, was a top priority.<sup>104</sup> An Israeli report claimed that Netanyahu saw these meetings as an “important channel for delivering messages” to the Saudis.<sup>105</sup> A year later, Eshki visited Israel and met Gold and several Knesset members in what became a highly publicized event.<sup>106</sup> In Israel, it is believed that Turki's and Eshki's public meetings would not have taken place without direct authorization from the Saudi court.<sup>107</sup>

Informal Israeli-Saudi contacts have not been confined to geopolitics; there are indications that the countries have also cooperated in the medical, economic, and technological spheres — all in the utmost secrecy. Thus, for example, Professor Moshe Many, head of the Urology Department at the Chaim Sheba Medical Center at Tel HaShomer, near Tel Aviv, privately treated then-Prince Fahd for diabetes from 1968 to 1970.<sup>108</sup> Other Saudi princes (as well as other Arab dignitaries) occasionally were treated at the Hadassah Medical Center's two hospitals in Jerusalem.<sup>109</sup>

In the economic sphere, there are no official statistics for Israeli trade with Saudi Arabia. According to a 2018 Tony Blair Institute paper, the estimated volume of indirect exports in 2016 from Israel to GCC countries (which includes Saudi Arabia) — was around \$1 billion. This makes the Gulf the third-largest Israeli export market in the Middle East after Turkey and the PA. Israeli products have to be delivered through third parties without any labels identifying their origin. The fact that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states do not have trade unions — which are often very hostile to Israel in Egypt and Jordan, hindering their economic ties — is an advantage.<sup>110</sup> After signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, Jordan became a major bridge between Israel and the Gulf. First, Saudi Arabia began to occasionally permit Turkish trucks that arrived at the

104. Graham, “Israel and Saudi Arabia”; Dawud al-Shiryān, “كذبة «مقاومة التطبيع»” [“The lie of ‘normalization resistance’”], *Al Hayat* (UK), June 14, 2015, [www.alhayat.com/article/817875/](http://www.alhayat.com/article/817875/). See also Eshki's interview with Henrique Cymerman, “Saudi Arabia: The General Who Wants Peace,” *Insight*, i24 News (Israel), September 7, 2015, posted on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/Hnxzyf3Dc>. It is ironic that it was Gold who authored *Hatred's Kingdom* in 2002, a scathing criticism of Saudi Arabia.

105. Amir Tibon, “הפגישות בין גורמים מִישראל ומסעודיה בידיעת נתניהו” [“The meetings between authorities from Israel and Saudi Arabia with Netanyahu's knowledge”], *Walla!* (Israel), June 11, 2015, <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2862795>.

106. Barak Ravid, “Former Saudi General Visits Israel, Meets with Foreign Ministry Director-General,” *Haaretz*, July 22, 2016, [www.haaretz.com/1.5414512](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5414512).

107. Interview, Ya'alon, May 2017, Tel Aviv; interview by the author with Dore Gold, June 4, 2018, Jerusalem.

108. Yoram Gabison, “From Treating Kings and Shahs to Revolutionizing Israeli Medicine: The Enigmatic Life of Professor Moshe Many,” *Haaretz*, May 24, 2013, [www.haaretz.com/1.525817](http://www.haaretz.com/1.525817).

109. For example, see the memoirs of the director of obstetrics and gynecology at Hadassah–Ein Kerem: Joseph Schenker, רופא נשים [Women's doctor] (Jerusalem: Contento, 2014), 549.

110. “Assessing Israel's Trade with Its Arab Neighbours,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, August 14, 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/middle-east/assessing-israels-trade-its-arab-neighbours>.

Port of Haifa to enter the country on their way to Jordan.<sup>111</sup> Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Turkish products that had been delivered to the Gulf through Syria are now being delivered through Haifa and Jordan.<sup>112</sup> Second, while Israeli imports from Jordan have increased from \$94 million in 2010 to \$411 million in 2015 (though it declined to \$308 million in 2016), most of these imports originate from the Gulf and not from Jordan, according to economist Yitzhak Gal, and include raw materials and products of the chemical and plastic industries.<sup>113</sup> Third, since September 2014, Israeli Palestinians who perform the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina can now fly from Israel to Saudi Arabia via Jordan on Royal Jordanian airlines.<sup>114</sup> It should be noted that, in late 2014, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development officially permitted Jews, though still not Israelis, to work in the kingdom.<sup>115</sup>

There are also firm indications for Israeli-Saudi cooperation in the field of cyber technology. For example, when hackers breached a Saudi Aramco computer, an Israeli firm was called in to solve the problem. Also, Israeli artificial intelligence firm Intuview designed a special program for the Saudi royal court that would identify potential violent extremists in the kingdom by sifting through streams of social media messages.<sup>116</sup> Saudi Arabia is a potential market for Israeli products in numerous other fields, such as pest control, irrigation systems, agriculture and more.<sup>117</sup> Salman Al-Ansari, founder of the Saudi American Public Relation Affairs Committee, spoke of a "beneficial economic partnership" that may bring Israel to participate in Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 economic reform, particularly in the field of water desalination.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, there are indications that Israeli firms plan to bid for contracts, through third parties, in Smart City, a \$500 billion urban project to build an energy-efficient city at the entrance to the Gulf of 'Aqaba.<sup>119</sup>

111. Jonathan Ferziger and Peter Waldman, "How Do Israel's Tech Firms Do Business in Saudi Arabia? Very Quietly," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, February 2, 2017, <https://bloom.bg/2kjLvXF>.

112. Interview, Ya'alon, May 2017, Tel Aviv; interview by the author with Ayoob Kara, Israeli deputy regional cooperation minister (2015–17), June 5, 2017, Jerusalem.

113. Interview by the author, April 8, 2017, Tel Aviv.

114. Zohar Blumenkarantz, "עולי רגל מוסלמים יטוסו מישראל לסעודיה" ["For the first time: Muslim pilgrims will fly from Israel to Saudi Arabia"], *The Marker* (Israel), September 7, 2014, [www.themarker.com/news/aviation/1.2426211](http://www.themarker.com/news/aviation/1.2426211).

115. Faris al-Nawwaf, "السماح باستقدام معتنقي اليهودية للعمل في المملكة" ["Permission for inviting practitioners of Judaism for work in the kingdom"], *al-Watan* (Saudi Arabia), December 30, 2014, [www.alwatan.com.sa/Economy/News\\_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=210367](http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Economy/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=210367).

116. Interview by the author with Dr. Shmuel Bar, the founder of the company, March 28, 2017, Herzliya, Israel. Bar admitted, for the first time, that the Saudi request came from the crown prince's office, and the software was eventually also used to discover what young Saudis feel on the basis of their social media interactions.

117. Interview, Ya'alon, May 2017, Tel Aviv.

118. Salman Al-Ansari, "How Israel Can Contribute to Saudi's Vision 2030," *The Hill*, October 11, 2016, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/300447-how-israel-can-contribute-to-saudis-vision-2030>.

119. Max Schindler, "Israeli Companies Talking to Saudi Arabia about \$500B. 'Smart City,'" *Jerusalem Post*, October 25, 2017, [www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Israeli-companies-likely-talking-to-Saudi-Arabia-about-500-bil-smart-city-508429](http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Israeli-companies-likely-talking-to-Saudi-Arabia-about-500-bil-smart-city-508429); Max Schindler, "Business Ties to Arab World Skyrocketing, Says Venture Capitalist Margalit" *Jerusalem Post*, April 22, 2018, [www.jpost.com/Jpost-Tech/Business-ties-to-Arab-world-skyrocketing-says-venture-capitalist-Margalit-552460](http://www.jpost.com/Jpost-Tech/Business-ties-to-Arab-world-skyrocketing-says-venture-capitalist-Margalit-552460).

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of Israeli-Saudi relations since 1948 shows that the two countries maintained a relationship over the years based on pragmatic considerations. Beyond rhetoric, Saudi Arabia never challenged the existence of Israel. The kingdom's not sharing a border with the Jewish state helped it avoid direct involvement in Arab-Israeli wars. At the same time, Saudi Arabia did financially support the Palestine Liberation Organization (and later Hamas) and backed a diplomatic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The kingdom usually succeeded in treading carefully between the need to appease radical elements in the Arab world and its dependence on US muscle for its defense needs. Playing an increasingly significant regional and international role as a result of the oil boom since 1973, Saudi Arabia adopted a proactive policy in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict on two occasions, initiatives by then-Crown Prince Fahd in 1981 and then-Crown Prince 'Abdullah in 2002, but the Israeli response was lacking. Furthermore, over the years, the kingdom has gradually relaxed its economic boycott of Israel.

Although unwilling to admit it, Saudi decision-makers have considered Israel's existence a convenient diversion for dissent, acting as a safety valve for the kingdom's stability and survival. This logic has been relevant in at least three of the four threats Saudi Arabia faced from the Hashemite dynasty (particularly during the reign of King 'Abdullah I of Jordan), Nasserism, Saddam Husayn, and finally Iran. Except in the case of the Hashemite threat, Israel and Saudi Arabia shared a common interest in eliminating these threats. Even their attitude toward the Palestinians — rhetoric aside — is not substantially dissimilar, and while the irresolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a source of regional instability, Israel's existence contributes, in Saudi eyes, to the system's equilibrium. The upheavals in the Arab world since 2011 known as "the Arab Spring" have further reinforced the Saudi conviction that Israel can help maintain the balance of power in the Middle East system by helping to thwart an Iranian-led Shi'i revival. However, in view of the relationship between the two countries since 1967, the shift in Saudi policy toward Israel after the Arab Spring seems to be more evolutionary than revolutionary.

Israeli leaders have traditionally viewed Saudi Arabia as an extreme and fanatical religious state supporting terrorism. While unnecessary escalation in the animosity between the two countries has been prevented by their not sharing a border and Saudi nonintervention in Arab-Israeli wars, this negative image prevented Israeli decision-makers from appreciating the pragmatism underlying Saudi policy since 1967, which may explain why the two Saudi peace initiatives received a chilly, even hostile, response. While the Gulf War and Israel's restraint during the war constituted a turning point in the Saudi attitude toward Israel, the change in the Israeli position occurred following the 2006 Lebanon War, when several Israeli politicians realized that Israel and Saudi Arabia in fact share common regional interests, specifically against Iran, Islamic violent extremism, and Hizbullah. The fact that the Middle East and its challenges are seen similarly from both Jerusalem and Riyadh has created a solid foundation for cooperation that was initially conducted indirectly through emissaries, yet has become more direct and public since 2006. In fact, various sources indicate that the two countries have established an intelligence liaison for sharing information regarding common threats. Moreover, the number of encounters between Israeli and Saudi officials and

nonofficials, both public and covert, has risen dramatically since 2006. A reliable indicator of the level of trust between the two countries is the fact that, between 2009 and 2013, Saudi Arabia purchased \$52 billion in advanced American military equipment without opposition from the Israeli lobby in the United States or Israel itself, marking a significant change since the strident objections over the AWACS deal in 1981. The absence of objections is a clear indication that Israel no longer considers Saudi Arabia a potential enemy.<sup>120</sup>

Mutual Saudi-Israeli interests originally stemmed from a realist axiom of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Yet, new paths of cooperation were forged, and new mutual interests explored. Over time, the two countries realized that they did not, in fact, pose a threat to either’s existence. Communications between Israel and Saudi Arabia were historically held in secret, usually through trusted third parties like the US or various intermediaries. Yet, since the 2006 Lebanon War, if not earlier, high-ranking intelligence and political officials were directly involved in secret contacts and meetings, culminating in a meeting between the Israeli and Saudi militaries’ chiefs of staff. In addition, in the last decade public meetings between former officials increased, as did favorable media coverage of these contacts. Since Israel was always eager to make public its illicit connections with Arabs, exposure of these contacts can be attributed to a change in Saudi attitude, which stems from the desire to use Israel as a public deterrent against Iran, something that would not be feasible if the Israeli-Saudi connection remained hidden.

While it can be safely predicted that Saudi Arabia would not be willing to openly normalize its relations with Israel before a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reached (or at least significant progress is made), Israeli-Saudi relations have undeniably undergone significant transformations since 1948. In fact, alongside Israel’s peace with Egypt and Jordan, the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia (and the Gulf in general, excluding Qatar) constitute a pillar of Israel’s Middle East policy. In contrast to the heyday of the Arab-Israeli conflict, when Israel was compelled to forge links with Arab countries’ non-Sunni or non-Arab populations (including Kurds, Maronites, and Druze) and with non-Arab countries on the Middle East’s periphery (such as Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia), Israel now has access to — and, indeed, cooperation with — the Sunni Arab countries in the core of the Middle East.

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120. Guzansky, “Israel and the Arab Gulf States,” 140; Thom Shanker, “U.S. Arms Deal with Israel and 2 Arab Nations Is Near,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2013, <https://nyti.ms/2OA0zSy>.



*POSTSCRIPT*

The archives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem contain a file regarding an idea, proposed by a student of Islamic studies named Eliyahu Epstein in 1928,\* two years after the establishment of the School for Oriental Studies. He suggested that the university send an archaeological mission to Khaybar, an oasis located 95 miles (150 kilometers) north of Medina that had been home to a Jewish community that had been expelled in the 630s,† in order to investigate the possibility of discovering some remains of a “Jewish connection.” Epstein’s supervisors, as well as Hebrew University chancellor Judah Magnes, welcomed the idea but thought that the delegation should receive a formal authorization from the government in Hijaz, which had been conquered from the Hashemite dynasty by ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud in 1925. Magnes approached Brigadier General Sir Herbert Clayton, a British intelligence officer with close connections to the Saudi ruler, to obtain permission for the delegation, but Clayton was unwilling even to raise the idea with ‘Abd al-‘Aziz.‡ And thus, the potential first encounter between Israelis and Saudis was never realized. Ninety years later, the idea of an Israeli archeological delegation to Saudi Arabia is still a fantasy — but, as this article has shown, less far-fetched than before.




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\* Epstein became a well-known Arabist and diplomat, eventually changing his surname to Elath. As mentioned in the article, he would play a role in another attempt to forge a connection with ‘Abd al-‘Aziz in the 1930s.

† Early Islamic sources date the expulsion to the early reign of the Caliph ‘Umar bin al-Khattab (634–44); see Peter C. Hennigan, *The Birth of a Legal Institution: The Formation of the Waqf in Third-Century AH Hanafi Legal Discourse* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 119.

‡ L. A. Mayer to L. Bilig to Magnes, January 30, 1928; Epstein to Magnes, February 26, 1928, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, file 91/4, 1925–1930. I would like to thank Professor Yohanan Friedmann from the Arabic Department for discovering this document, revealed on the occasion of the 90th anniversary celebration of the School of Oriental Studies.