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## Future Tracks of Israeli-Saudi relations

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It is remarkable that the Saudi affair has become part and parcel of the concern of Israeli media and research centers, with respect to the internal Saudi scene and the kingdom's regional and international relations, including the future of Saudi-Israeli political, economic, and security relations.

It appears that rapprochement between Tel Aviv and Riyadh is due to having a common objective, namely their desire to counter the Iranian nuclear project. In fact, Saudi-Israeli relations cannot be hidden any more, especially after US President Donald Trump announced weeks ago that "Israel would be in big trouble without Saudi Arabia".

Also, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has bragged that Israel has a strong network of relations with a number of Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia which has common interests with Israel, most notably their desire to confront Iran's growing influence in the region.

Israelis believe that the role of Saudi Arabia in maintaining regional stability and its escalating contacts with Israel cannot be hidden for long. This was evident in US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's comment on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi when he defended the US-Saudi alliance under the pretext that the Kingdom has an important role in maintaining stability in the Middle East.

On the other hand, the tepid relations between Washington and Riyadh because of the Khashoggi murder may cast a negative shadow on the Israeli-Saudi track, and may even

push Saudi Arabia to oppose the 'deal of the century', and affect continuation of Saudi-Israeli contacts.

However, Khashoggi's murder has been met with Israeli silence so far although the official Israeli position adopted the Saudi narrative of the death of the Khashoggi. Taking into consideration that the Iranian threat comes on top of Israel's priorities, it is normal for Tel Aviv to consider Saudi internal issues as less important; and Israeli ministers, members of Knesset and foreign ministry officials made no comment on the incident. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described Jamal Khashoggi's brutal murder at the kingdom's Istanbul consulate as "horrific," he stressed that Riyadh's stability was crucial for global stability. "What happened in Istanbul is horrific, nothing short of that. It's horrific. And I think that will be dealt with in its own way," Netanyahu said, adding that Khashoggi's gruesome assassination should be "balanced by the importance of Saudi Arabia and the role it plays in the Middle East", and reiterated keenness on maintaining (good) relations with Saudi Arabia.

While there was a lot of anger worldwide over the Khashoggi affair, international media reported that Israeli Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot and his Saudi counterpart Fayyad al-Ruwaili met on the sidelines of the Counter-Violent Extremist Organizations conference in the United States last October. This confirms that Israel gives priority to its conflict with rather than any other considerations. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia's internal issues - to Israel - are less important to Israel than the Iranian threat; and even Trump knows perfectly well that democracy can wait.

It is noteworthy that Israel's position towards Khashoggi's murder - siding with Saudi Arabia - brought to mind that Tel Aviv's former alliance with the apartheid regime in South Africa in the past.

During the last two years, the Saudi-Israeli relations reached unprecedented advanced levels. There have been several reports about visits paid by Saudi officials to Israel and a meeting between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which means that the growing hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia has resulted in boosting the kingdom's relations with Israel.

The security summit in Aqaba, Jordan, last year, which convened Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen with his Arab counterparts, including Saudi Arabia, to discuss US President Donald Trump's settlement plan in the Middle East, known as 'Deal of the Century', confirms previously circulated reports on establishment of secret relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Before the Aqaba security summit, there had been reports about Israeli-Saudi meetings, including one between former Mossad chief Meir Dagan and his Saudi counterpart, and another between former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert with Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former head of the Saudi intelligence service.

With regard to Israel's perception of the future of its relations with Saudi Arabia, there are several Israeli voices stating that Israel has secretly maintained relations with the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia, and it is time to announce them officially. Within the framework of the Israeli-Saudi warm relations, there is a series of articles published by Saudis from time to time in domestic newspapers, showing sympathy with Israel.



Many Saudi users of social networking sites do not hesitate to establish relations and contacts with Israelis via Facebook, Twitter and others including extending congratulations on Jewish holidays. Even some of them communicate with Israelis via Hebrew which they have learned in the Kingdom's universities.

Some Saudi writers said that Saudi Arabia would not stand against Israel forever, and that Riyadh would support Tel Aviv if it attacked Iranian forces in Syria. This suggests that such voices have certainly received a green light from Saudi authorities in this regard.

Israel is aware of what is written and circulated in Saudi Arabia. In his statements, Netanyahu refers to his understanding of Saudi fears from Iran, which means that we are witnessing a new era of Israeli relations with new friends in the region. Moreover, Israeli and Saudi officials conduct significant closed discussions and debates together. Also, there are voices in Israel that call for a need to open direct talks between Tel Aviv and Riyadh and establish bilateral relations and maintain contacts between them as part of a new reality in Israel's foreign relations in the region. When Israel's Minister of Energy Yuval Steinitz was asked in an interview why Israel was "hiding its ties" with Saudi Arabia, he replied: "We have ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab countries, and usually (we are) the party that is not ashamed. It's the other side that is interested in keeping the ties quiet. With us, usually, there is no problem, but we respect the other side's wish, when ties are developing, whether it's with Saudi Arabia or with other Arab countries or other Muslim countries, and there is much more ... (but) we keep it secret." Yuval Steinitz added that Israel is an influential country in terms of technological, economic, intelligence, scientific, and diplomatic aspects and that many countries in the region seek rapprochement with Tel Aviv, including Saudi

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Arabia. Steinitz said Israelis should ask Arab countries wishing to establish relations with Israel to make this in public or they will not get what they want from Israel.

One of the dangerous signs of the growing Saudi-Israeli relations is that at the time when tens of Palestinians were martyred in Gaza while protesting the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, Saudi officials remained silent and did not utter a single word in comment!

The Israelis are aware that many Saudi activists criticize Palestinians in social networking sites and accuse them of being Iranian arms. Also some Saudi intellectuals express positive stances towards Israel. Perhaps the statement of Saudi Ambassador to the United Nations Abdullah al-Mouallimi during the UN General Assembly hearing on a US-sponsored resolution that sought to condemn Hamas, reflects the prevailing Saudi sentiment towards Israel. It is noteworthy that al-Mouallimi condemned the firing of missiles by Palestinians at Israeli settlements without saying a word about the Israeli aggression on civilians in Gaza.