

# How Israeli/Saudi 'Alliance' Plays Trump

As novices to the world of Mideast intrigue, President Trump and son-in-law Jared Kushner are being led by Israel and Saudi Arabia into a dangerous confrontation with Iran, explains former British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

The Israeli web site Debka, though not always reliable in some respects, nonetheless, occasionally, can give useful glimpses into the Israeli calculus: Here it is expressing somewhat unusual enthusiasm, even open rapture, about a recent political event:

“The Saudi king’s decision to elevate his son Mohammed bin Salman ... is not merely the internal affair of the royal hierarchy, but a game-changing international event. The king’s son is ready to step into his allotted place in a new US-Arab-Israeli alliance established by President Trump in May, along with the UAE, Egyptian and Israeli leaders that will seek to dominate Middle East affairs. Israel will be accepted in a regional lineup for the first time alongside the strongest Sunni Arab nations who all share similar objectives, especially the aim to stop Iran” [emphasis added].

“A game-changing international event”? Why exactly are these Israelis so excited; why should the elevation of bin Salman, known by the initials MbS, be such a game-changer? Is there here something new? And how come the dismissal of Prince Nayef, whom MbS replaced as crown prince and who was a Western favorite, barely ruffled a leaf in protest?

On the face of it, not much has changed. Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu’s (and his father’s) obsession with Iran is well known. The Israeli PM (like his father before him) believes that Iran is the precursor to a new Jewish holocaust.

It was not always like this however: the Ben Gurion doctrine of courting regional minorities to Israel’s side (including Iran), was only “flipped” when the Israeli Labour Party won parliamentary elections in 1992.

In short, Iran’s subsequent identification with Satan by the Israeli government effectively was a domestic Israeli political need of the electoral moment: switching from the Arabs as “enemy” – in order for Rabin to make peace – required, in public terms, that Iran become the “far enemy” – the new existential threat to “plucky little” Israel’s survival, vice the now peace-partnering Arabs.

Netanyahu however, is a true “believer” (in Iran’s murderous intentions), and

tried to corner President Obama into destroying Iran, by threatening America that either you do it (bomb Iran) – or, Israel shall (which effectively amounted to making America “do it” anyway). Obama demurred, and avoided Bibi’s binary threat to him of “war or war” by rather unenthusiastically negotiating a JCPOA with Iran – and thus re-balancing the region.

### **A New Strategic Situation**

So what has changed? Iran has just re-elected President Hassan Rouhani who upholds the JCPOA and who actively engages with the West, and does not exude any clear and present danger to Israel, or the region (ISIS and al-Qaeda apart). “Nothing to see here”: aside from some jostling with U.S. partner forces for future influence in Syria.

Clearly however, Debka does espy something new in the strategic situation. And they may be right. Ostensibly, on the surface, things may look the same, but two dynamics seem to be conflating that may account for official Israel’s high excitement. (It is not just Debka that is on a high – several senior intelligence and security officials at the recent Herzaliya security conference, were also selling the imminent strategic change meme.)

One of the two conflating dynamics which might help us understand the enigma of Israeli satisfaction is this: a well-known Arab journalist wrote recently of a dinner held some months ago in the Gulf (with prominent Gulf guests), at which an unnamed former Arab Prime Minister was quizzed about MbS’ prospects of becoming king. What he said shocked the gathering. Some expressed their incredulity.

He said bluntly: if MbS wanted to come to the throne, he would need America’s blessings. He would need to offer them something that no one had offered before – that no one had dared to offer before. And what was that, the journalist asked the former PM that MbS must offer: “He must recognize Israel. If he does that, the U.S. will support him. They’ll even crown him themselves.”

In one of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories, Holmes’s solution to a particular mystery rested on “the dog did that did not bark in the night.” Holmes’s point was why had the dog not barked when its nature is to bark.

It is common knowledge that the U.S. has been firmly committed to Prince Nayef succeeding King Salman. The authoritative Saudi insider and blogger Muhtahidd has tweeted that the U.S. sent messages last year to MbS warning that he should not seek to supplant Nayef. In July 2016,

Mujtahidd tweeted that Secretary of State John Kerry had told MbS that Nayef continuing as Crown Prince was a “red line” for the U.S.

Why then did the U.S. “dog” not bark on the night that MbS seized the succession, just before dawn? We have heard not one tiny growl on Nayef’s behalf. In fact, a trawl through Mutahhid’s early tweets lays it all bare ... if one bothers to connect the dots.

## **A Kingmaker**

The main actor in this drama is Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ), the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, who according to Mutjahidd recognized MbS’ ambition from early on, and saw in him an instrument by which MbZ could gain personal influence through becoming kingmaker in Saudi Arabia. From the outset MbZ apparently urged MbS to obtain America’s support for him becoming king – via the channel of Israeli full support.

In tweets from May 2, 2016, Mujtahidd describes MbZ’s advice to bin Salman: first, seize the succession to the throne before King Salman dies; second, gain U.S. favor by moving the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia away from religious values – away from values that reinforce an Islamic identity, and third, expand ties with Israel.

Mujtahidd developed the third element in his tweets – ties to Israel – by saying that it began “shyly” as a lead-in to direct contacts. Senior Saudis were to be encouraged to participate in debates with Israelis (i.e. appearing on Israeli TV channels), while highlighting a common interest in combatting Iran and fighting “terrorism.”

MbZ was also reported by Mujtahidd as advising MbS to please Israel by supporting President Sisi of Egypt (with whom the Israelis have a close relationship) – and finally, Mujtahidd reports MbS (again in July last) that Netanyahu had met with MbS at Aqaba, three months earlier.

All of Mujtahidd’s points made over a year or more have been borne out in practice: The Saudi succession has been seized before the king has died; MbS has paraded his “opposition to religion” and Vision 2030 has emphasized a more secular, liberal economic identity for Saudi Arabia; Sisi has been supported (in spite of political differences); and Saudi ties to Israel have become incrementally more visible.

Mujtahidd is clear: There is no “big bang” shock recognition of Israel planned, but a continuing incrementalism (Israeli use of Saudi airspace, institution of telephone links, etc.).

On the one hand, Israel may be seeing the ambition and opportunism of two young men (MbZ and Mbs), but what “bakes the cake” for Israel, is the background, long-term dynamic of the declining legitimacy the Gulf “system” of monarchical,

non-representational rule – a vulnerability exacerbated by financial tightening: an austerity that promises to limit Saudi ability to buy out popular disaffection.

This – the declining standing of Sunni authority and the leadership of Islam which the Saudis claim to be theirs and theirs alone – is what MbS and MbZ wish to reverse. Qatar was the first victim of their insistence on complete obedience.

### **Crosscurrents of Change**

It was the “Arab Awakening” that initially fanned secular alienation with the absolute nature of the monarchical system, but then the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine of the Umma (the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion) as sovereign, undermined it further, but from the Islamic stance. A left and a right punch. Also, the revisionist history of the first Islamic State, presented by ISIS, shreds Saudi’s religious credentials completely.

This is the combination that may be provoking such Israeli excitement: The ambition and opportunism of two young crown princes, coupled by their desire to restore Sunni authority (and the obedience of subordinate states) by mobilizing the Sunni world in a “jihad” against Iran and “terrorism,” must be music to some Israeli ears.

And this is the rabbit hole down which President Trump has fallen. It matters little whether the primary motive for Trump’s Riyadh fiesta was pecuniary, or whether it was triggered by son-in-law Jared Kushner’s ambitions. Either way, Trump has embraced pushback against Iran (and seemingly, regime change, as Rex Tillerson has implied). In fact, Trump seems to be surrounding himself more and more with anti-Iranian advisers. He seems to like the notion of leading an alliance of the U.S., Israel and the two Crown Princes pushing back against Iran and its “terrorism.”

The Shi’a – pilloried by the Sunni Establishment as discontents, rejectionists and revolutionaries – have over a thousand-year history. Language changes, but the Shi’a as (false) innovators, apostates, heretics – and now “terrorists” – are as old as Islam. Terrible persecutions have ensued over the centuries. And Shi’a Islam is no insignificant 10 percent minority – in the Arab heartland, it is more like 60-40 percent. In the northern crescent, it is some 100 million Shi’i to 30 million Sunnis. And Shi’ism is undergoing a profound revival.

What interest of America will be served by intruding into these ancient animosities? MbS, MbZ and Netanyahu may be American “allies,” but their interests are not America’s. The former might be happy for America to spill its

blood in fighting their fights. But why should Trump want to do that?

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