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Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel: the national security imperatives

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Saudi Arabia's policy towards Israel was marked by hostility and distrust from the very beginning. However, unlike its Arab neighbours, Saudi Arabia had to moderate its policy over the years due to compelling reasons having to do mainly with its concern for its security in the Gulf region, its rivalry with regional powers such as Egypt and Iran, and above all, its concern for the durability of its ties with the United States of America (US). The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Saudi Arabia's security concerns, its traditional rivalry with the Hashemite family and its ties with the US had a significant impact on its policy towards the Jewish state. It demonstrates how Saudi Arabia's aspiration to hegemony in the Middle East led to tacit cooperation with Israel already during the 1960s, when Egypt's President Gamal Abd al-Nasser dispatched troops to Yemen in support of the Republicans who fought against the Royalist regime of Imam Muhammad al-Badr whom Saudi Arabia sought to prop up. In addition, the article demonstrates how Iran's quest for hegemony in the region brought Saudi Arabia to cooperate once more with Israel at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Iran embarked on its nuclear programme and sought to expand its influence by supporting the militant Palestinians led by Hamas, the Houthis in Yemen and Hizballah in Lebanon. The article argues that the pragmatic approach pursued by the Saudi royal family ushered in a policy aimed at earning the Kingdom concrete benefits such as hegemony in the Gulf region and US support, which helped it procure sophisticated weapons and secure a market for its petroleum exports. The essay shows that it was not until the Six-Day War of June 1967 that Israel began to loom large in Saudi foreign policy even though the actual Saudi peace proposal known as the Fahd Plan was not published until 1981. The defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day War enabled the Saudi regime to assume a greater role in the Arab-Israeli conflict due to its ability to provide financial support to the defeated countries and rebuild their armies. The article concludes by arguing that despite the unexpected rapprochement between the two countries Saudi Arabia is unlikely to normalise its relations with Israel until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved.

The early years

Since the early days of its existence, Saudi Arabia faced significant domestic and foreign threats which helped moderate its policy not only towards its immediate neighbours but also towards the emerging Jewish state. First and foremost, the Saudi regime's endemic struggle with the Hashemite family led by Sharif Hussein of Mecca intensified King Ibn Saud's fears of a possible emergence of a Hashemite state comprising both Iraq and Palestine. From the Saudi point of view, an intense campaign against the Zionists who immigrated to Palestine prior to the establishment of Israel was risky since it was likely to help the Hashemites incorporate Palestine into

a large state which they could dominate. Despite the fact that he opposed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, Ibn Saud was opposed to the Iraqi leader Nuri al-Said's plan to incorporate Palestine in a federation with Transjordan and Iraq, and he called upon the British to prevent such a possibility. As for Palestine, he opined that Jews ought not to be mixed with the Arabs.¹ His opposition to an independent Jewish state was so intense in the beginning that he warned the US on numerous occasions that supporting the Zionists was likely to have an adverse effect on Saudi-US relations. According to Benjamin Sumner Welles, who was one of President Franklin Roosevelt's top diplomats, Ibn Saud had written 'unpleasant' and 'childish' letters demanding an end to Jewish immigration to Palestine. He told Roosevelt that Palestine was a 'sacred Moslem Arab country' that 'belonged to the Arabs' and he called the Jews vagrants and exploiters who had an imaginary claim to Palestine based on fraud and deceit. Attempting to allay Ibn Saud's fear, Roosevelt expressed his hope for a peaceful resolution and promised to consult both sides before reaching a final decision on the future of Palestine.² He reassured the King on several occasions that no decision would be made that would affect the country's status without consulting both the Jews and the Arabs.³ The Saudi obsession with this issue manifested itself clearly when members of the royal family continued to pressure the US government to renew its pledge to consult both sides prior to taking any action on behalf of the Jews. For example, in a letter to US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes from 20 November 1945, the American chargé d'affaires in Cairo stated that Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Amir Faisal asked whether Washington still intended to keep its promise.⁴

In the aftermath of the Second World War, President Harry Truman had eagerly taken the opportunity to cement his relations with Saudi Arabia whose king agreed to allow the construction of a US airfield in Dhahran. In return, Truman pledged to support Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity. Seeking to escape the accusation by religious and nationalist elements that he was dealing with an infidel country the King chose to keep that agreement secret.⁵ Yet, despite its harsh condemnation of the Jewish enterprise in Palestine the Saudi regime's willingness to confront Israel militarily had its limits. During the Palestine War of 1948, Saudi Arabia sought to contribute to the general Arab effort to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Yet, the Saudi regime wanted neither its regular army nor its volunteers to be directly involved in the fighting. Except for a small number of regular troops that were placed under Egyptian command the force that Ibn Saud sent to the battlefield amounted to no more than a handful of untrained tribesmen riding camels.⁶ At the same time, however, the Saudi regime was in no position to ignore the Palestinian problem. The impact of the Palestinian diaspora in Saudi Arabia, particularly those who were employed in the oil industry manifested itself already in the early 1950s. Their number increased significantly and they constituted a significant majority among the expatriate workers who took part in the Saudi Aramco strike in 1953.⁷

The Saudi attitude towards the Jews was not merely a by-product of cold and calculated considerations. It was also marked by irrational anti-Semitic feelings. Commenting on the Saudi attitude towards Jews US President Dwight Eisenhower recalled that, 'In our government's negotiations for landing rights in Saudi Arabia for American military personnel, one of the conditions imposed by the Saudi government was that no Jew will be allowed on the field.'⁸ This blind hostility to everything Jewish continued to manifest itself in Saudi Arabia's attitude towards Israel. Thus, the Saudi regime continued to prohibit Jews from occupying top government positions and refused to allow tourists carrying Israeli passports to enter the country. Any official contacts with Israelis which implied recognition of the Jewish state were forbidden, even if they remained limited to cultural or sporting events.

Despite their tolerance of the alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia, Israeli statesmen often expressed concern over the arms deals between the two countries. Similarly, the Saudis were displeased with Washington's commitment towards the new state of Israel. Yet, the US-Saudi alliance had a moderating impact on the Saudi attitude towards Israel. Having to preserve the alliance with Saudi Arabia and Israel at the same time, successive US administrations had to

reassure both sides that supplying arms to both was only meant to establish a proper balance of forces in the region. For example, when Eisenhower decided on 15 February 1956 to supply Saudi Arabia with light tanks the news alarmed the Israelis. He defended his actions, saying that his objective was to be impartial to both sides.⁹

Although the Saudi regime tried to avoid fighting the Israeli army, it was obliged to condemn the Israeli operations against Palestinian guerrilla warriors who penetrated Israeli territories bordering the Gaza Strip in the early 1950s. While the pan-Arab sentiment intensified in the Middle East, the Saudi regime found it necessary to condemn any Israeli reprisal against an Arab country. Moreover, it used diplomatic means for that purpose. For example, following the Sinai Campaign of 1956 in the aftermath of which Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and part of the Sinai Peninsula, King Saud travelled to Washington with a memorandum drafted and signed by Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia demanding unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all territories.¹⁰ This initiative, however, came largely as a result of the Kingdom's concern that unrest would bring the Israelis to infringe on its territories. Indeed, the Kingdom's border with Israel did not remain entirely quiet. When Eisenhower visited Saudi Arabia on 30 June 1957 King Saud complained that the Israelis had raided his territory on several occasions.¹¹ In one of his conversations with Eisenhower, the King described Israel as a bitter enemy and stated that 'while it was well to remember that the Communists are no friends of ours, yet Arabs are forced to realize that Communism is long way off, Israel is a bitter enemy in our own back yard.'¹² King Saud was hostile to Israel but unlike Egypt and Syria he was unwilling to collaborate with the Soviet Union in its anti-Israeli campaign. He is quoted as saying 'I shall have nothing to do with the Soviets.'¹³ Moreover, according to Eisenhower, the King tacitly agreed that Israel as a state is a historical fact and must be accepted as such.¹⁴ Yet, at times the King went to the extreme and talked about the destruction of Israel as the best solution to the problem. In a memorandum to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on 3 December 1957, Eisenhower writes: 'It appears that the King now has one simple, even though completely unrealistic, solution to the Mid East problem. That solution is the destruction of Israel.'¹⁵

Indeed, King Saud had written a letter on 21 November 1957 in which he told Eisenhower that the time has come to end the 'tragedy' of the creation of the state of Israel and to return the Palestinians to their home with 'compensation for their losses and properties.'¹⁶ Apart from his concern for the Palestinians, Ibn Saud had demonstrated hostility to Israel's strategic interests, particularly when these tended to clash with those of Saudi Arabia. For example, he regarded the Gulf of Aqaba and the Straits of Tiran as strictly Arabian waterways while the Israelis considered them open to navigation by every country. Therefore, he did not react favourably to the movement of Israeli vessels in these waters and argued that it was likely to incite all Muslims and allow 'partisan and seditious propaganda to undermine our efforts to calm the situation and open up a new era of stability and peace in the region.'¹⁷ Moreover, he expressed resentment against US support of Israel on numerous occasions. In one of his letters, he reminded Eisenhower that all Muslims were united in their conviction that international Zionism and Israel were their primary enemies and that 'They consider that all who assist Israel financially, militarily and politically are antagonists and all those who assist them in all these fields of action against Israel are their friends.'¹⁸ Yet, even during the apogee of Pan-Arabism when Nasser inflamed the Arab world with his fiery speeches that condemned Zionism and vowed to lead all Arabs into war with Israel, there was a considerable measure of cooperation between the Saudis and the Jewish state, which helped to reduce Saudi resistance to US sales of arms to that country. The US officials who came into contact with their Saudi counterparts were struck by their moderate attitude. This moderate reaction manifested itself clearly in 1962, when the US decided to sell Hawk missiles to Israel. Commenting on Saudi Arabia's reaction to the sale former US Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted that, 'During the Kennedy years we also supplied arms to Jordan and Saudi Arabia, so this helped the Arabs take the Hawk missile sale in stride.'¹⁹ The sale, as it turned out, did not prevent Saudi Arabia from cooperating with Israel shortly afterwards, when

the tension between Riyadh and Cairo mounted as a result of Egypt's intervention in the Yemeni civil war. The Saudi regime was compelled to assess the gravity of the situation and to give priority to its security concern over the Nasserist expansion in southern Arabia and its potential impact on the stability of the royal regime. Consequently, Israel was not regarded as an immediate threat and the cooperation served Saudi immediate needs.

The Israeli cooperation with Saudi Arabia manifested itself clearly first in early 1964 when Nasser's involvement in support of Abdallah al-Sallāl who led the Republicans in the Yemenite civil war against the Royalist regime of Imam al-Badr caused great concern in Riyadh and the government was determined to support the Royalists. Seeking to supply arms to its Royalist allies Saudi Arabia contacted the Mossad with a view to arrange for the transfer of weapons and equipment from Israel to the Royalists. In what became known as *Mivtza Rotev* (Operation Sauce), the Israelis became engaged in a dozen clandestine airlifts that supplied aid to the Royalists. The operation was supervised by King Faisal's intelligence chief Kamal Adham with British mercenaries acting as interlocutors. This unprecedented collaboration took place because both sides had a common interest: Saudi Arabia sought to prevent Nasserism from spreading to the Arabian Peninsula while Israel sought to keep Nasser's forces occupied in that region.²⁰ The Saudis did not escape criticism by Egypt and Syria, which joined forces in order to expose what they regarded as a flagrant violation of Arab solidarity and an unforgiveable treachery. Merely a few years after the crisis that followed the dissolution of the United Arab Republic, which had united Egypt and Syria since 1958, the two countries found another common cause and both indulged in condemning Saudi Arabia. Syria's President Nurreddin al-Attasi went to the extent of criticising Saudi Arabia for collaborating with the imperialist powers, which were bent on protecting 'the criminal, Zionist entity.'²¹

Saudi Arabia's contribution to the Arab war effort in all the wars with Israel was minimal. Its contribution to the Palestine War and the Sinai Campaign was almost nil. In the Six-Day War, it supplied 4500 men, 10 tanks and 40 aircraft in an effort to defend Jordan (the total Arab force had been over 250,000 men, 2000 tanks and 950 aircraft). However, the Saudi forces arrived too late to the battlefield to make a difference. Saudi Arabia's contribution in the Yom Kippur War of October 1973 was just as dismal: it contributed 1500 men, one tank squad and some aircraft but the Saudi force participated in no more than one minor combat.²² With scant resources, serious domestic problems and a hostile attitude on the part of many Arab states, Saudi Arabia had little clout in the Arab-Israeli conflict up to that time.

Saudi Arabia and Israel (1967–1988): between hostility and cooperation

Prior to the Six-Day War, relations between Saudi Arabia and Egypt reached their nadir and it was not until the war ended that Saudi Arabia was in a position to exert influence on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Apart from its domestic problems, Saudi Arabia was locked in what seemed to be an endless fight for supremacy with Egypt over the Middle East. Caught up in a struggle against Egypt and the radical nationalist ideology spread by Nasser in Yemen, the Saudi regime saw no urgency to intervene in the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, things began to change in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in which the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan were defeated. While the Arab defeat dealt a major blow to Egyptian influence in the Arab world, it elevated Saudi Arabia to a significantly higher place. This was largely due to its ability to financially support the defeated Arab states and replenish their arsenals.

Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Egypt began at the Khartoum Summit Conference of August–September 1967 when Sudan's Prime Minister Muhammad Ahmad Mahjub appealed to King Faisal saying that as a 'noble Arab' he ought to refrain from killing a wounded rival but nurse him to health instead.²³ In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the Kingdom began participating regularly in Arab summit meetings. It played an important role not only in rebuilding the

Arab armies but also by supplying aid to the Palestinians. Realising that Egypt could not be relied upon as a major supporter of the Palestinian cause, Chairman Yasser Arafat sought better relations with Saudi Arabia. Confident that the Saudi regime was sympathetic to the Palestinian cause he embarked on operations against Israel from areas in southern Jordan, adjacent to the Saudi border. The Israeli general and future prime minister Ariel Sharon recalled his encounter with a Saudi contingent, which supposedly fought Israel alongside the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early 1970s. Saudi presence close to the southern border with Jordan provided the PLO with a sense of security but no significant encounter between Israeli and Saudi forces ever took place.²⁴ Yet, Saudi Arabia's commitment to the Arab belligerents brought it closer to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Assured of their ability to have an impact on the conflict the Saudi leaders began expressing their opinion in a far more assertive manner and used their clout in Washington to achieve their regional goals. The first time that Faisal approached the US regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict was in the summer of 1972, after Egypt's President Anwar al-Sadat decided to expel the Soviet advisors from his country. Faisal appealed to US President Richard Nixon to reciprocate by adopting a more even-handed policy towards the conflict.²⁵

This activist policy of Saudi Arabia which began under Faisal intensified under his successor King Khaled. Saudi Arabia's voice became loud and clear, particularly after the oil embargo which it imposed on the US in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in which Egypt and Syria embarked on a surprise attack on Israel during the High Holiday of Yom Kippur and managed to recover some of the territories that they lost in the Six-Day War. Throughout the entire decade, Saudi Arabia expressed its resentment over the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and saw itself as the rightful custodian of the holy places in that city. Basing its claim on the Islamic tradition that Prophet Muhammad's night journey from Jerusalem to Heaven was the last stage of his earthly existence, the Saudi regime argued that the city was Islam's third holy place after Mecca and Medina and that it ought to be controlled by the Saudi King who was also the custodian of the first two cities.

Saudi Arabia supported the United Nations (UN) resolutions 242 and 338, which called for total Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands in return for Arab recognition of the Jewish state's independence. It also called for Israeli evacuation from the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem and supported the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia's voice was heard for the first time at the Summit Conference in Khartoum when it supported the decision that determined that the Arab states would not recognise Israel, would not negotiate and/or make peace with it. Yet, by the mere fact that Saudi Arabia supported the above-mentioned UN resolutions it provided a hint of willingness to recognise Israel's independence following its withdrawal from the conquered Arab lands, and it was not until the end of the Yom Kippur War that it began to adopt a militant stand against Israel. When the war erupted, Faisal appealed to Jordan's King Hussein to allow a Saudi brigade stationed in Jordan to move to Syria but the brigade lost its way in Jordan and King Hussein had to send a desert patrol to find it and lead it to Syria.²⁶ Moreover, Faisal expressed his disenchantment with Washington's decision to supply Israel with weapons by airlift during the war. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's attempt to explain Washington's decision to rearm Israel in the context of Cold War diplomacy failed, leaving Faisal disgruntled.²⁷ Moreover, Nixon's decision to provide Israel with \$2.2 billion of emergency aid was not well-received in Riyadh. Seeking to compel the US to adopt a more even-handed policy towards the Israeli-Arab conflict, Saudi Arabia joined the petroleum exporting countries in the effort to reduce the exports. The outcome was that oil exports to the US were reduced by nearly 650,000 barrels of Saudi crude oil per day.²⁸ Faisal harboured irrational enmity towards Zionism which made it difficult for him to consider the possibility of better relations with Israel. He was highly critical of the Soviet Union's decision to allow Jews to immigrate to Israel.²⁹ Nixon who met Faisal during his visit to the Middle East in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War noted in his memoirs that he had an obsession with both Zionism and Communism. He writes: 'Faisal saw

Zionist and Communist conspiracies everywhere around him. He even put forward what must be the ultimate conspiratorial notion: that the Zionists were behind the Palestinian terrorists.³⁰

The impact of the oil embargo and the reaction of world public opinion emboldened the Saudi regime to such an extent that it took every opportunity to appear influential in Middle Eastern affairs and even in the Israeli-Arab conflict which had no direct bearing on its security. The Saudi leaders realised that replacing Egypt as the leading Arab power compelled them to be involved in all matters of common Arab concern, particularly in the Palestinian problem. Consequently, they became more active and expressed their opinion with unprecedented determination. For example, when the disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt was discussed in January 1974, their position was that the agreement was only the initial phase of a settlement which must include total withdrawal of Israeli forces and a solution to the Palestinian problem.³¹ Yet, at the same time, there was growing concern in Riyadh that supporting the Palestinians might lead to Saudi military intervention against Israel. Therefore, giving free reign to the Palestinians was not an option for the royal family. At the same time, ignoring the problem was just as risky since it could lead to discontent in the Palestinian camp and help the militants among them to gain control of the liberation movement. Aware of that dilemma, Nixon noted that 'The Saudis are concerned that any settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict that does not resolve the Palestinian problem will increase the militancy of the Palestinians.'³²

There were further indications of Saudi activism in the Israeli-Arab conflict. At a summit meeting which took place in Rabat in 1974, the Arab leaders agreed to establish a military fund of two billion and six hundred thousand dollars to which Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf countries agreed to contribute. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia agreed to lease the island of Perim at the southern entrance of the Red Sea to enable Egypt to block the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb to Israeli shipping when needed.³³ Faisal continued to insist that Israel withdraw from all occupied territories and allow the Palestinians to return to their homeland. He told Kissinger at their meeting in February 1975, 'There must be established in Palestine, by agreement, a mixed Jewish-Muslim state.'³⁴ He even went to the extent of urging him to demand Israeli compliance. Unmoved by these suggestions Kissinger remarked, 'I gently turned this aside.'³⁵

Saudi Arabia's petrodollars enabled it to exert influence in the UN and other international organisations. Moreover, its ability to support poor states in Asia and Africa brought these countries to support anti-Israeli resolutions and thereby undermined Israel's efforts to expand its influence in these countries. The Saudi regime's dedication to Arab unity brought it to support numerous anti-Israeli resolutions, especially the one equating Zionism and racism. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia did not wish to forfeit its role as a mediator. Its diplomacy was calculated to maintain Arab unity while preventing Arab radical states like Syria and Libya and militant Palestinians from causing another war. Hence, its policy wavered between not endorsing the Camp David accords of September 1978 between Israel and Egypt and not rejecting them.³⁶ Unlike Egypt, Saudi Arabia was in no position to accept the Camp David accords which both the Palestinians and the radical Arab states rejected. Even though it used its economic power to convince Syria to accept the second Sinai accord, limit its intervention in Lebanon and accept the Golan disengagement agreement with Israel, the Kingdom's ties with Egypt remained strained.³⁷ Egypt's distrust of Saudi aims had a limiting impact on the Kingdom's influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Consequently, it was less likely that the Saudi regime would deal directly with Israel. Besides, the Saudi king had little faith in the sincerity of the Israelis and he doubted that they would be willing to honour commitments made at Camp David. Cyrus Vance who visited King Fahd and Jordan's King Hussein shortly afterwards came out with the impression that both were convinced that Sadat obtained little for his willingness to compromise. Moreover, he recalled that 'They expressed disbelief that the Israelis would carry out the terms and spirit of the accord.'³⁸

The close relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia raised concern in Israel whose supporters in Washington had always attempted to undermine it fearing that the supply of weapons

to Riyadh would alter the balance of power in the Middle East in the Arabs' favour.³⁹ By the spring of 1979, reports circulated in the press, saying that Israel was disseminating negative information about the royal family in an effort to undermine US-Saudi relations. The *Washington Post* claimed on 15 April 1979 that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had issued a report stating that the Saudi regime was in a state of instability. As it turned out, this was a gross exaggeration, but it caused tension in US-Saudi relations.⁴⁰ In addition, Israel's military cooperation in the late 1970s with Turkey caused concern in Riyadh.⁴¹ Therefore, any hopes for better relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia were frustrated by the events.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the early years focused on the potential threat to its security by its immediate neighbours and despite its solidarity with the Arab cause, it did not become deeply involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The common interest which Israel and Saudi Arabia had in maintaining stability in Jordan helped to reduce the tension between them. Despite the old Hashemite rivalry, the Saudis had no desire to see Jordan fall in the hands of the Israelis or the PLO since this was likely to involve them directly in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The main foreign policy question which Saudi Arabia had to deal with had long been what to do in case of such a scenario.⁴² Israel's commitment to protect Jordan's King Hussein became abundantly clear in the fall of 1970, when he crushed the Palestinians in his country, causing Syria to invade Jordan and Israel to mobilise its forces along the border.⁴³ Despite the common interest which both countries had in protecting King Hussein, the Saudi regime regarded the Israeli move with suspicion. General Khaled Bin Sultan who later commanded the Saudi forces in the Gulf War noted in his memoirs that 'Israel's aggressions against the Arabs ... continue to preoccupy us intensely.'⁴⁴ Yet, despite the harsh Saudi rhetoric against Israel there were contacts between the two countries, both on the intelligence and the commercial levels. There were reports that the Mossad has been involved in selling Israeli military hardware to Saudi Arabia. According to a report by a former Mossad agent, the Israeli Aeronautical Industries sold Saudi Arabia reserve fuel tank pylons capable of carrying extra fuel to allow its jets to fly on longer distance operations. At the same time, Israel sold these pylons to the US. Resentful that they were paying a higher price, the Saudis contacted the Americans asking to buy the pylons from them. Consequently, the Israelis protested and the Jewish lobby in Washington argued that the sale would allow the Saudi F-16 aircraft the capability of attacking Israel, but the agent remarked, 'Yet we knew how dishonest this was ... because they were being sold under a civilian cover for much more than the Americans would have charged. A lot of things were being sold to the Saudis in that way. They're a big market.'⁴⁵

According to US sources, Israel, Saudi Arabia and China supported the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan with a total annual sum of \$100 million. Israel may have been a minor contributor but Soviet-made weapons which Israel captured in its previous wars against the Arabs were delivered to Afghanistan through Saudi Arabia, which maintained close relations with the *mujahedeen*.⁴⁶ While there were contacts between the two countries, none of Saudi Arabia's approaches to Israel was direct and all were accompanied by an effort to maintain consensus in the Arab camp.⁴⁷ The US sale of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) reconnaissance planes to Saudi Arabia in 1981 was a major concern for Israel whose friends in Washington expressed their deep concern about the impact of the sale on Israel's security.⁴⁸

President Ronald Reagan justified the sale by connecting it to his efforts to move the peace process forward. For example, in a letter to Reverend Billy Graham on 5 October 1981, he argued that 'a refusal to allow the sale will set us back perhaps irretrievably in our Middle East peace-making effort.'⁴⁹

The Saudi attitude toward Israel tended to harden as a result of pressure exerted by radical Arab states such as Syria, Libya and Algeria. At the same time, however, this pressure had a moderating impact on the Saudi peace initiatives. The rise of King Fahd marked a new chapter in bilateral relations since he was leaning more towards compromising with Israel than most Saudi monarchs.⁵⁰ In August 1981, he published a peace plan which stipulated that Israel must

withdraw from all occupied territories, but it also stated that all Middle Eastern states have the right to live in peace and that the UN would be in charge of implementing the plan. Prior to the publication of the Fahd Plan, Mossad agent Yaakov Nimrodi and his business partner Al Schwimmer met the Saudi tycoon Adnan Khashoggi whose connections helped Nimrodi obtain the secret document which mentioned the possibility of recognising Israel, if it agreed to allow Saudi Arabia to hoist its flag over the holy places in East Jerusalem as a symbol of guardianship over these shrines in return for Saudi efforts to bring about a settlement between Israel and the Arabs. But when Nimrodi brought the document to the attention of Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin before its official publication, Begin refused to accept the offer which he considered extremist and unacceptable.⁵¹ This was the first time that any Arab state would have recognised Israel if indeed it agreed to full withdrawal and to the repatriation of the Palestinians. However, strong opposition by Syria, which was not consulted on this matter, led Saudi Arabia to modify the plan at the Fez Conference of the Arab League in September 1982. The modified plan eliminated the clause emphasising the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace and the new clause that replaced it merely stipulated that the UN Security Council would provide a guarantee of peace among all states in the region, including an independent Palestinian state. Thus, Israel's right to exist was reduced to a mere hint.⁵² Furthermore, while the Saudis were talking about the possibility of implementing the peace plan, they embarked on the construction of a major air base at Tabuk, a mere 125 miles from Israel's port city of Eilat. When the Saudis conducted exercises on that base, the Israelis warned them by practising raids on it.⁵³ The American spy Jonathan Pollard was the one who provided the Israelis intelligence information about the Saudi military industrial complex in Tabuk.⁵⁴ Pollard's material included essential KH-11 satellite imagery, in addition to reports and assessments from US embassies and intelligence operatives inside Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt and they were sent to the Israeli government for inspection.⁵⁵

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which resulted in the defeat of the PLO forces and their exodus to Tunisia triggered harsh criticism from the Saudi government. However, Fahd did not confront the Israelis directly but used his influence in Washington. He sent a message to Secretary of State George Shultz insisting that the US put pressure on the Israelis to withdraw from Beirut because as he put it 'his honor, name and credibility were at stake.' He added, that Saudi Arabia could not help implement the US peace initiative unless the Israelis evacuated the city.⁵⁶ Similarly, Israel did not refrain from using its leverage in Washington to pressure Saudi Arabia to moderate its position toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. For example, when the US Ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, met the leader of the Israeli Labor party Shimon Peres to discuss Sadat's peace initiative, he asked, 'Do you think I should raise the idea that the United States can and must pressure Saudi Arabia and Jordan?' Peres immediately concurred.⁵⁷

Saudi Arabia's fear that its oil resources were vulnerable to Israeli attacks persisted and thereby had a cooling effect on the bilateral relations. Furthermore, its concern that the lack of a solution to the Palestinian problem might cause deeper Soviet intervention did not dissipate.⁵⁸ Yet, despite Saudi Arabia's hostility towards Israel minor incidents never led to military clashes as both sides took precautionary measures to avoid them. For example, when an Israeli missile boat sailed in the Red Sea and accidentally landed on the Saudi coast during a rescue operation of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia in 1984, the Israelis requested that the Americans inform the Saudis that the vessel had landed there by mistake and the crew was freed.⁵⁹ And when the Falasha Jews who suffered from drought and famine fled to Sudan in September 1984, Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir appealed to Shultz to use American influence in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to persuade Sudan's President Jaafar al-Nimeiry to allow the rescue operation to take place.⁶⁰

The bilateral relations were adversely affected by the American plan to supply arms to Saudi Arabia in 1987. Once more, the supporters of Israel in Washington rallied to the cause and tried to prevent the sale. When Congress expressed concern about the adverse effect, which the sale

of 1600 Maverick anti-armour missiles to Saudi Arabia would have on Israel's security, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Richard W. Murphy found it necessary to reassure the opponents of the sale. He told the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 10 June 1987, 'This administration has not and will not entertain any arms sale request which negatively impacts on the security of Israel.'⁶¹ Similar reassurance was given by the Acting Spokesman of the State Department Phyllis E. Oakley who said in her press briefing on 29 September 1987 that 'the administration remains committed to maintaining Israel's quantitative edge.'⁶² When Saudi Arabia purchased CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles from China that year, the Reagan administration reacted with strong disapproval. At the same time, the Israelis warned that they might attack the missiles. According to Hume Horan, then the US ambassador in Riyadh, 'The Israelis told us, let it be known, that we better do something about those missiles or they would.' At the same time, the US Assistant Secretary of Defense, Richard Armitage, chided the Saudi ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar, for provoking the Israelis.⁶³ The irony was that these Chinese *Eastwind* ballistic missiles had been improved by Israeli technicians in a deal arranged by the businessman Shaul Nehemia Eisenberg.⁶⁴

On 26 April 1988, Saudi Arabia announced its decision to sign the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This announcement came after Israeli officials hinted that they would destroy the CSS-2 missiles which Saudi Arabia acquired from China and were said to be capable of being equipped with nuclear warheads. This move came after a bipartisan group of 58 senators sent a letter to Shultz in mid-April 1988, stating that they opposed the proposed \$825 million sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia. Another letter to that effect was signed by 187 representatives. Concerned about its relations with the US and anxious to obtain arms from it, the Kingdom sought to reduce the tension and therefore signed the NPT. US officials told *The New York Times* that the Saudi decision to sign the NPT would give 'symbolic assurances to Israel' and 'placate' congressional concerns.⁶⁵

The birth and death of the Arab peace initiative

King Fahd's practical approach to foreign policy issues manifested itself clearly prior to the Gulf War of 1990–1991, when Washington pressed Israel not to respond to Saddam Hussein's provocation. When asked what would be his country's response if Israel responded to such provocation, he told General Norman Schwarzkopf that he could not expect Israel to stand by idly if attacked. Moreover, he made it clear that Saudi Arabia would remain on the American side even if Israel decided to retaliate.⁶⁶ Ordinarily, Israelis and their supporters in Washington strongly opposed US arms sales to Saudi Arabia. However, unlike the previous times, Washington's decision to sell Riyadh \$4 billion worth of arms in 1990 did not cause much alarm in Israel. Nor did the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington protest much. Convinced that Iraq's threat increased significantly in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, the Israelis became less concerned about a Saudi threat.⁶⁷

Following Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, Israel explored the possibility of joining the war against Iraq and sought permission from Saudi Arabia to enter its airspace. Responding to the Israeli request to allow its warplanes to enter Saudi airspace US Secretary of State James A. Baker III opined that it was 'too much to ask for.'⁶⁸ In his meeting with King Fahd shortly after the Gulf War, he proposed a variety of confidence-building measures that both Israel and Saudi Arabia might consider. He suggested that the Saudis drop the economic boycott of Israel; reject the 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism; end the state of belligerency with Israel; meet low-level Israeli officials; and share with Israel intelligence information to combat terrorism. In return, he said that he would convince Israel's Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to agree to end the deportation and detention of Palestinians and to withdraw from some of the occupied towns in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He reassured the King that their agreement would

be held in confidence. According to Baker's account, the King seemed amenable to the idea of peace but only on the proviso that the Palestinian problem was resolved.⁶⁹ In May 1991, Baker informed Bandar of the American plan to convene a conference in which representatives of Israel and the Arab countries were to meet. The King seemed accommodating.⁷⁰ The Palestinian issue continued to be a major stumbling block for the Saudi regime but Israel's refusal to sign to NPT did not lead to strong reaction in Riyadh. Nevertheless, Saudi officials deemed it appropriate and even necessary to raise objections to Israel's possession of nuclear weapons. Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan ibn Abdul Aziz stated on more than one occasion that his government had no nuclear designs and that it aspired to promote a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. And when the issue was discussed at the UN on 14 May 1999, the Saudi ambassador Fawzi Shobokshi stated that Israel's refusal to cooperate made it difficult for Saudi Arabia to become a trusted mediator in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Moreover, the Saudis expressed their resentment at the fact that the US tolerated the Israeli position. Nevertheless, they agreed to an indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. The efforts of the Saudis were aimed primarily at maintaining their image of guardians of Arab interests and less at convincing Israel to give up its nuclear option, an attempt which they were convinced would be futile.⁷¹

Saudi Arabia's fundamental tenets of foreign policy remained basically unchanged over the years. Its primary condition for improving relations with Israel was the same as it had been, namely that Israel must solve the Palestinian problem. Much less was said about the early condition that Israel must withdraw from the territories that it occupied in the Six-Day War. For example, in one of his speeches, the Saudi diplomat Prince Turki al-Faisal al-Saud stated that Saudi Arabia's primary concern was to find a solution to the Palestinian problem and the second was to clear the region from weapons of mass destruction.⁷² He did not mention the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories. Furthermore, while it is true that the nuclear factor continued to be an obstacle to better relations between the two countries and that the Kingdom insisted that nuclear disarmament ought to be the precondition for peace the Saudi peace initiative of 2002 did not require from Israel to dispose of its nuclear weapons.⁷³ By contrast, the Saudi regime remained obsessed with the Palestinian problem to such an extent that when the tension between Israel and the PLO reached one of its crescendos and the Israelis besieged the West Bank city of Ramallah where Arafat resided, Crown Prince Abdallah asked former US President George W. Bush on 25 April 2002, 'When will the pig leave Ramallah?' Bush remarked that 'Clearly the Saudi ruler was not happy with Ariel Sharon.'⁷⁴ Saudi Arabia's role in the peace process was discussed once more by Abdallah at a later meeting with US Vice President Dick Cheney. Abdallah opined that as leader of the Palestinian liberation movement, Arafat ought to be treated as partner in the negotiations.⁷⁵

In the spring of 2002, Abdallah submitted a proposal that became known as the Arab peace plan. It called upon Israel to agree to what the Arab states regarded as a 'just peace.' According to this plan, in return for full normalisation, Israel had to find a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, withdraw from all the territories conquered after the Six-Day War, including Lebanon, and agree to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with Jerusalem as its capital.⁷⁶

Coming at the same time, as the terrorist attack in the northern city of Netanya where 28 Israelis were killed on 27 March 2002, the Arab peace initiative was doomed from the very beginning. Commenting on the plan Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said, 'We cannot, of course, ignore the problematic aspects which arose at the Beirut summit and the harsh rejectionist language used by some of the speakers.' Likud Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made similar statements while announcing the onset of Operation Defensive Shield, which sent the Israel Defense Force into the West Bank and Gaza in order to put an end to the Palestinian assaults. Many government officials found some positive points in the Arab plan but overall, it was not regarded as a practical solution. When the Israeli government stated that the demand regarding the return of the Palestinian refugees was unrealistic, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal replied that 'This

initiative is an indivisible whole and consequently it is impossible to accept one part of it and refuse another.⁷⁷ Thus, came to an end the discussion over a plan which could have possibly resolved the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and allowed the Kingdom to normalise its relations with Israel with little or no criticism.

The Iranian threat and Israeli-Saudi collaboration

The growing influence of Iran in the region, which has manifested itself clearly since the Israeli-Hizbullah war of 2006 worried the Saudi government that Iran's penetration of Lebanon and its encouragement of the Palestinian militant Hamas in Gaza constituted a substantial threat to a Saudi hegemonic role in the region. Furthermore, Iran's nuclear project was regarded with suspicion in Riyadh. These concerns led the Saudi regime to adopt a pragmatic approach and to regard Israel as a potential ally due to the common concern about the Iranian threat. In an interview with RAND Corporation, one scholar stated that the Iranian threat brought more pragmatism into the pan-Arab dialogue and that instead of 'confrontation' the Arab states started emphasising 'engagement' even with Israel, if necessary.⁷⁸ Reports about meetings between Israel and Saudi Arabia began circulating shortly after the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah. The two sides are said to have discussed the impact of the Iranian threat and the Israelis expressed their willingness to reconsider the Arab peace initiative of 2002. However, fear of criticism from Islamists and Arab nationalists led the Saudis to deny that the meetings ever took place.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran took a turn for the worse and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blamed Israel and the US for causing trouble between two Muslims states.⁸⁰ Moreover, Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani was reported to have said that 'The hostility of the Saudis toward Iran was covert in the past, but they are now openly engaged in enmity against Iran.'⁸¹ These expressions of Iranian hostility brought the Saudis to seek an ally in the region. Once again, Washington's decision to supply arms in 2007, not only to Israel but also to Saudi Arabia, its Gulf neighbours and Egypt caused concern among Israel's supporters. However, this time, the Israelis were much less concerned. Convinced that the enemy of the Jewish state was Iran rather than Saudi Arabia, Likud Prime Minister Ehud Olmert agreed to the proposal. He told the Israeli Cabinet, 'We understand the need of the United States to support the Arab moderate states and there is a need for a united front between the U.S. and us regarding Iran.'⁸²

At a dinner in the State Department in May 2009, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to appeal to King Abdallah, whose role as Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines gave him the clout needed to jumpstart the peace process, to take the lead in the Middle East peace negotiation. Shortly afterward, the US President Barack Obama raised the issue of reviving the peace process with Abdallah but the attempt failed as a result of Netanyahu's refusal to freeze the construction of settlements in the West Bank.⁸³ Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's growing concern about the Iranian nuclear programme forced upon it the need to maintain contact with Israel. In 2010, Washington decided to sell \$60 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia. As usual, the Israelis objected to the deal and its supporters in Congress joined forces to abort it. Once again, the objection was mild and it subsided as soon as it was determined that the sale would have no adverse effect on Israel's security.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the two countries continued to look for ways to sabotage the Iranian nuclear project. According to a press report, Saudi Arabia agreed to fund Mossad operations against senior Iranian nuclear scientists. This report was attributed to former CBS News producer Barry Lando who was described as a friend with close connections to Israeli government sources. According to Lando, the Saudis sought to retaliate against the Iranian regime which they blamed for sabotaging the computers of the state-owned Saudi Aramco Company in 2012. Lando was reported to have said that 'With most of Israel's traditional allies in the region sent packing or undermined by the Arab Spring,

the Saudis are the Jewish State's last chance to protect its political interests in the Arab world.⁸⁵ According to Fred Burton, Stratfor's Vice-President of Counterterrorism, Mossad officers have long been making a fortune from selling the Saudis intelligence information and equipment.⁸⁶ Both Arab and Israeli sources claim that the two countries started trade negotiations in 2015 and there are even those who argue that such contacts began as early as 2014. Both countries expressed their opposition to Obama's accord with Iran, which stipulated that in return for easing the US economic embargo it would have to provide reassurance that its nuclear project would be used solely for peaceful purposes and that it would allow for periodical international inspection.

Meanwhile, Israeli foreign policy was aimed at improving ties with more countries in Asia and Africa. Some Israelis such as Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman saw the Qatari conflict of June 2017 with the Gulf States as an opportunity to improve ties with Saudi Arabia, but while the Saudis continued to link the Palestinian problem to normalisation the Israelis sought to separate the issues. Lieberman was quoted as saying, 'It is forbidden to condition the development of ties with the moderate Arab states on the solution of the Palestinian issue.'⁸⁷ For quite some time, the Israeli leaders began talking about the need to form an alliance with the Arab states against the Iranian nuclear threat. Peres who served as Israel's prime minister and later as president once told journalists in Washington, 'We ought to put constant and determined efforts to settle our affairs ... because Iran is a greater danger for the Arabs and the Israelis.'⁸⁸

According to recent reports, the Saudis expressed willingness to provide Israel an air corridor and air bases for rescue helicopters, tanker aircraft and drones in case Israel decided to bomb the Iranian nuclear facility. According to these reports, Israeli security personnel including the Mossad have met with Saudi representatives five times between 2014 and 2018. The meetings were held in India, Italy and the Czech Republic. In addition, Mossad officials visited Riyadh where they had secret discussions regarding the Iranian threat. Apparently, there was a meeting between the Director General of the Saudi Intelligence Agency Prince Bandar and Israeli intelligence officials in Geneva. It was also reported that on 5 June 2015, the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Dore Gold met the Saudi former general Anwar Eshki at a conference in Washington where they discussed means to deal with the Iranian threat. Moreover, King Salman was reported to have sent Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal to negotiate with Israel. The latter was reported to have declared that his visit to Jerusalem marked the end of the enmity between Israel and the Arabs. The Arab media quoted the Saudi Petroleum Minister, Ali al-Naimi, as saying that his country was ready to export oil to all countries, including Israel. Moreover, in August 2014, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal told the World Assembly of Islamic Scholars in Jeddah that 'We must reject planting hatred toward Israel and we should normalize relations with the Jewish State.' There were even reports that Israel provided the Saudis with intelligence data on Yemen.⁸⁹

Other developments such as the meetings between Turki al-Faisal and the Director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security studies, Amos Yadlin, and later with former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy reinforced the conviction among observers that the two countries are bent on stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The news regarding the cooperation of the two countries in developing a new and more destructive computer virus to sabotage Iran's attempt to develop nuclear weapons; the Saudi call for forming an international coalition against Hizballah; the Saudi willingness to accommodate Israeli scholars and publish translations of their publications; and above all, the tendency of both countries to be less secretive about the contacts, all indicate that cooperation between them is likely to increase in the foreseeable future. However, full normalisation of relations between them is unlikely to occur unless the Palestinian problem is addressed. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice mentioned in her memoirs that the two issues that stood in the way of greater understanding with Saudi Arabia were Iran and the Palestinian problem. She recalled that when meeting King Abdallah, 'He exhorted me to deal with Teheran and to solve the Palestinian conflict by pressuring Israel.'⁹⁰

Despite the common concern about Iran's nuclear threat, Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia are not likely to develop unless the Palestinian issue is addressed.⁹¹ Turki al-Faisal told former Netanyahu advisor Yaakov Amidror that once Israel reaches an agreement with the Palestinians his government would be willing to move towards normalisation.⁹² Likud Minister, Yuval Steinitz, was one of the sources who revealed to the *Jerusalem Post* that Israel maintains covert contacts with Saudi Arabia.⁹³ According to a recent report by *Al-Jazeera*, Israel instructed its overseas embassies to lobby their host countries on behalf of Saudi Arabia and its campaign against Iran and Hizballah. According to that source, Israel instructed its diplomats to stress that Lebanon's Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri's resignation in November 2017 has demonstrated that Iran and Hizballah are the real danger to Lebanon's security. The diplomats were instructed to convince their host countries to call for Hizballah's resignation from the Lebanese government and to support Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis in Yemen. Moreover, the message to the diplomats argued that the missile launched from Yemen to Saudi Arabia required that more pressure be applied on Iran and Hizballah. Observers regarded this message as an attempt by Israel to form a coalition with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states against Iran and Hizballah. The fact that both Israel and Saudi Arabia opposed Obama's deal with Iran encouraged the two sides to collaborate. Aware that Saudi Arabia is exposed to danger in Syria as well as in Yemen, the Israelis had good reasons to hope that their influence in Washington would eventually bring the two countries closer.⁹⁴

According to former US Ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro, the Saudi regime seemed very impatient to spark a confrontation between Israel and Hizballah.⁹⁵ Eager as it is to please the Saudis, Israel has so far shown that it is not willing to be dragged into the Lebanese quagmire by fighting Hizballah for them. Like Saudi Arabia and all other Sunni Arab states Israel is interested in weakening the Shia alliance, which includes Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Hizballah. However, an encounter with Hizballah is likely to cost Israel many casualties and deal a major blow to its economic progress. Consequently, neither Netanyahu nor anyone in his government seems anxious to start a war from which Saudi Arabia would be the only beneficiary.⁹⁶

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated how Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel were marked by inconsistencies from the very beginning. Although the harsh official Saudi rhetoric remained fairly consistent in its opposition and condemnation of Israel, the Kingdom pursued a pragmatic policy which dictated moderation and at times even cooperation with the Jewish state. Saudi Arabia's attitude towards Israel can be understood better if one takes into consideration its strategic needs. It seems that in the early days of the Jewish state, the Kingdom had little to lose by opposing the creation of the state of Israel with which it shared no common borders. However, from the Saudi perspective, the alternative to the creation of the state of Israel could have been a domination of Palestine by the Hashemite family, a prospect which the royal family did not relish, particularly after a long history of competition with that family. Furthermore, the creation of the state of Israel did not seem to jeopardise the Kingdom's position in the region. The only concern of the Saudi family was to maintain its special position as the guardian of the holy sites in Jerusalem but this factor was not by itself enough to turn Saudi Arabia into a deadly enemy of the Jewish state. The Palestine War of 1948 allowed the Kingdom to demonstrate its solidarity with the Arab cause. However, the Saudi contribution to the war was insignificant and no substantial military encounter between Saudi and Israeli forces ever took place. Consequently, Saudi hostility towards the Jewish state remained moderate.

Another important factor which explains the Saudi attitude towards Israel was the special relations which the Kingdom had with the US, which helped to moderate its attitude towards Israel. The desire to maintain cordial relations with the US, which purchased much of the Kingdom's

petroleum and provided it the most sophisticated weapons, acted as a significant deterrent against excessive hostility towards Israel. The events of the 1960s in the Arabian Peninsula had a direct impact on Saudi security when Nasser sent forces to Yemen in order to support the Republicans against the Royalists. This state of affairs brought home to the Saudis the danger of radical nationalism, which penetrated the Arabian Peninsula and threatened the stability of the monarchy. Seeking allies to equip the Royalist forces, the Saudi regime found it beneficial to appeal to the Israelis for help. Though exceptional, this episode of cooperation left its moderating mark on Saudi Arabia's attitude towards Israel.

A thorough examination of Saudi Arabia's policy reveals that it was not until the Arab defeat by Israel in the Six-Day War that the Saudi regime began to exert influence on the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was mainly the Kingdom's ability to provide financial support and rebuild the Arab armies which enabled it to become a mediator and a peace maker. Saudi Arabia's growing influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict manifested itself with much greater force in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, when it yielded to Arab pressure to impose an oil embargo on the US. Thereafter, Saudi Arabia was provided with numerous opportunities to become influential in the conflict. Once more, the disengagement agreements that followed the war and the persistence of the Palestinian problem provided ample opportunities for the Saudi regime to appear as a peace maker. This role helped to minimise the Saudi hostility towards Israel. Also, the fact that both Israel and Saudi Arabia maintained close relations with the US from which they obtained arms helped reduce the mutual hostility over time.

The early 1980s witnessed a dramatic increase in Saudi intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Writing in January 1982, Robert Lacey opined that Prince Fahd's eight-point peace plan, which implied that Israel would gain recognition upon its fulfilment, was the Saudi equivalent of Sadat's journey to Jerusalem and that one should make do with less for the foreseeable future.⁹⁷ Indeed, meaningful normalisation did not become reality and is unlikely to become so in the foreseeable future.

Thirty-five years have gone by during which the two countries have developed common interests such as the need to confront the Iranian nuclear threat, to stem the rising tide of Shi'ism in Yemen and other regions close to Saudi Arabia, and to fight terrorism, and so far there is little hope for meaningful rapprochement. Despite the intelligence cooperation and the commercial transactions with Israel, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to agree to full normalisation unless a settlement to the Palestinian problem is found.

Disclosure statement

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