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**Between Operation Decisive Storm and an Iranian Nuclear Deal:
The Limits of Saudi-Israeli Convergence**

Mark A. Heller

Saudi Arabia is increasingly apprehensive about Iran, increasingly distrustful of the Obama administration's ability or willingness to contain Iran's hegemonial ambitions, and increasingly bent on confronting Iran itself -- with or without American approval -- even if that requires the use of military force. The most visible manifestation of this posture is the Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen, dubbed "Operation Decisive Storm," which was launched in late March in order to halt the advance of Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. The United States, Saudi Arabia's closest ally, was not consulted about Decisive Storm, as the head of Central Command was forced to acknowledge to the Senate Armed Services Committee; in fact, it learned about the operation only three hours before it began, when the American military attaché was called in for an advance briefing.

Such independent Saudi assertiveness against regional actors suspected of benefiting from Iranian support or at least of objectively enhancing Iranian influence is not altogether unprecedented. For example, Saudi (and UAE) forces were dispatched to Bahrain at the height of the uprising by the Shia majority against the Sunni monarchy in March 2011. But they did not directly engage in combat operations or take a major role in physically suppressing the rebellion. Thus the intervention in Yemen constitutes, if not an innovation, then certainly a dramatic elevation in Saudi activism.

Some analysts have attributed this change to the death of King Abdullah in January and the decision by his successor, King Salman, to promote more security-minded officials, including members of the next generation of royal princes (the grandchildren of King Saud), two of whom were subsequently named Crown Prince and Deputy Crown Prince. But while succession politics cannot be excluded from the policymaking equation, the most plausible explanation for more forward-leaning Saudi behavior is the conviction, cemented by the course of nuclear negotiations with Iran, that America is determined to reach a broad accommodation with Iran, apparently extending to other regional issues, as well. Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) disillusionment with the United States has reached the point where the former are signaling the intention to provide more substantive support to the Islamist forces in Syria confronting Bashar al-Assad (and Iran),

that is, precisely those forces that the United States has pledged to “contain and ultimately defeat.” And American concern about Saudi/GCC disillusionment has prompted President Obama to convene a summit meeting with GCC leaders on May 13, 2015 in order to forestall any Arab opposition to a presumptive nuclear agreement with Iran that could further embolden his domestic critics.

Like Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, Israel also sees Iran as its most dangerous adversary, and also has serious doubts whether the United States under Obama is still a reliable reed on which to lean. Buoyed by this shared perspective, some circles in Israel profess to believe that strategic coordination and intensification of ties with Saudi Arabia and other like-minded states has therefore become a viable policy objective. In the current circumstances, that hope ignores the fact that while Iran is feared and loathed in many Sunni Arab countries, Israel, though perhaps less feared, is no less loathed – because of Arab solidarity with the Palestinians. As a result, even anodyne diplomatic links, which most Arab states do maintain with Iran, are still categorically rejected with respect to Israel. Self-described Israeli realists, especially on the right, understandably prefer to ignore the Palestinian elephant in the room of Arab-Israeli relations, as they are not inclined to consider any substantive change in Israel’s current posture vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

It may well be the case that convergent threat assessments do facilitate some covert contact between the security echelons of Israel and some of the Arab states concerned about the shadow of Iranian hegemony, and the potential may exist for expanded ties. But the added value of more intense and/or overt ties is not self-evident, and it could be reasonably argued that the potential benefits to Israel of a real regional approach are too modest to justify the soul-searching and domestic political tensions that would inevitably ensue.

Whatever the potential benefits may be, a regional approach cannot be actuated without some tangible Israeli movement on the Palestinian question, or, if that is not possible – and it does not depend solely on Israel – then at least without some more persuasive evidence, in the form of a declaratory recommitment to a two-state outcome, endorsement in principle of the Arab Peace Initiative, and restraint in settlement construction, that the main obstacle to movement is not found on Israeli side. That, however, implies policy changes that the incoming Israeli government shows few signs of contemplating. Those who pride themselves on realism may legitimately conclude that the Palestinian “cost” is not worth the regional “benefit,” but they should at least refrain from indulging in the fantasy that Israeli involvement in a regional response to Israel’s challenges -- the Iranian threat, Islamist radicalism, American fecklessness, or anything else – is a substitute for movement on the Palestinian issue rather than a consequence of it.