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# **Israel's relations with the Gulf states: Towards the emergence of a tacit security regime?**

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## **Abstract**

By drawing on the literature about security regimes, this article posits the idea of that a particular type of regime, what can be termed a “tacit security regime” has begun to emerge between Israel on the one hand, and several Gulf Arab states on the other. It is a regime which, unlike liberal institutional variants that attempt to privilege the promotion of collective norms, remains configured around perceptions of threats to be countered and strategic interests to be realized. By examining the development, scope and scale of this nascent tacit security regime, this article explores the extent to which Israel, mindful of Washington, DC's regional retrenchment, sees the emergence of such a regime as redefining the political and strategic contours of Israel's relations with much of the Middle East.

**Keywords** Israel; Gulf States; security regime; Iran; deterrence

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## **Disclosure statement**

No conflict of interest has been reported by the authors.

## **Biographical Notes**

Clive Jones holds a Chair in Regional Security (Middle East) in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, United Kingdom. He specializes in the history and politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Gulf Security and has published or edited over seven volumes, including *Britain and the Yemen Civil War* (2004/2010), *Israel: Challenges to Democracy, Identity and the State* (2002), *The al-Aqsa Intifada: Between Terrorism and Civil War* (2005), *Israel and Hizbollah: an Asymmetric Conflict in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (2010), and *Israel's Clandestine Diplomacies* (2013).

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Car number plates rarely make national headlines. But in July 2015, a vehicle bearing a Saudi license plate was spotted in the port of Jaffa prompting not inconsiderable discussion on social media across Israel and making the front page of several national newspapers the next day. The owner of the car was indeed a Saudi who had crossed into Israel via Jordan to discuss a business venture with an Israeli Arab but irrespective of the commercial justification, it was the wider political symbolism of this sighting that carried most weight. As one Israeli journalist noted, “The nuclear agreement with Iran is starting to prove itself.” (“Car with Saudi license plates,” 2015)

For Riyadh and other Gulf states, the nuclear deal struck between Tehran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany (P5+1) in July 2015 may have served the interests of the Western powers, but it has done little to curb Iran’s regional interests or indeed its longer term nuclear ambitions (Guzansky, 2015, p. 129; “Israel and the Arab world,” 2016). This view remains widely held in Israel too. Although some within the country’s military and security establishment welcomed the agreement, from 2009 onwards successive centre right governments, led by Premier Binyamin Netanyahu, voiced their trenchant opposition to any deal that would allow Iran to increase financial aid to its regional proxies while maintaining a breakout capability within its nuclear program, albeit one diminished by the terms of the agreement (Jones, 2016).

It also highlighted a wider issue for both Israel and Saudi Arabia: The extent to which Washington, DC appears unwilling or unable to exercise strategic leadership across the region, a leadership on which both Israel and the Gulf states had based their regional security strategies (Simon & Stevenson, 2015, pp.2-10). This in turn poses a profound question: How can we conceptualize the scope and intensity of relations between Israel and the Arab Gulf states that have emerged since 2009? This article puts forward the argument that at the very least, such relations are now more pronounced and vibrant than hitherto realized: they

have now evolved into what we define as a “tacit security regime” (TSR) which, while based on hard power interests, does *not* preclude competition or co-operation in other areas between the actors involved.

The very idea of what constitutes a TSR remains contested; geo-strategic interests as well as ideational factors determine the intimacy or otherwise of relations between the actors involved. Even so, a consensus is clearly discernible around how adversaries – who would otherwise normally eschew more formal means of diplomatic exchange – manage their relations through a series of informal agreements and understandings and where, despite being unwritten and not codified, rules and boundaries in pursuit of wider shared interests or readily understood. Equally, such regimes do not have to privilege normative principles usually associated with international regime theories much beyond the maintenance of national security to be effective. To this end, the TSR between Israel and the Gulf states is very much a “work in progress,” its resilience in meeting contemporary security challenges being a function of shared perceptions of the threat presented by Iran, rather than a clandestine expression of a deeper intimacy beyond strategic gain.

The first part of this article offers an overview of security regimes more generally before outlining the genesis of the TSR in the extant literature. Building on this literature, we posit an analytical framework that while emphasizing the primacy of *Realpolitik* in the emergence of such regimes, appreciates how ideational concerns determine the scope and trajectory of Israel’s ties with the Gulf states. The second part offers contextual background on the emergence of the TSR; the third offers a more detailed application of the framework by examining Israel’s ties with several Gulf states but with a particular emphasis upon Saudi Arabia. Finally, we conclude by examining the wider significance of the TSR as a recognition and reflection of Washington’s regional retrenchment. More broadly, our conception of the TSR has an undoubted utility beyond the Middle East. It can inform and illuminate patterns

of state behavior between erstwhile protagonists in other parts of the world facing security challenges that have, hitherto, been arbitrated through the diplomatic and military influence of the United States.

### ***From Security Regimes to TSRs***

Unlike liberal institutional approaches that regard international regimes as largely collaborative mechanisms between allies designed to mitigate the worst excesses of the security dilemma while producing a normative public good, security regimes, with their emphasis upon hard power, are underpinned by shared perceptions of threats to be countered and interests to be realized. As that doyen of regime theory, Stephen Krasner, would most likely recognize, security regimes of this type remain the progeny of the classic security dilemma. (Krasner, 1983; Hasenclever, Mayer, & Rittberger, 1997, pp. 8-22.)

Yet much of the literature surrounding the establishment of security regimes still emphasizes the formal rules to be adhered to, often within an agreed institutional setting that eventually gives rise to formal alliances. In his examination of the Concert of Europe that broadly secured European peace for almost a century following the Napoleonic wars, Robert Jervis highlighted the shared understandings and the desire to maintain the status quo among the great European powers. His typology embraced (1) a mutual recognition of vital interests; (2) a propensity for longer term strategic gain brought about by restraint over immediate advantage; (3) that the actual concert did not conform to the actual distribution of power capabilities but rather conformed to agreed principles governing state behavior. From this, Jervis concluded that security regimes were configured around principles, rules and norms that engendered mutual reciprocity and restraint (Jervis, 1985, pp. 58-79).

At first glance, identifying any security regime in the Middle East demonstrating adherence to any of the three characteristics outlined by Jervis is not easy. Despite its relative

longevity, the GCC has hardly conformed to agreed principles governing security co-operation. Most notably, the attempt in 1991 to establish a peninsula force designed to deter any future Iraqi aggression – the so-called Damascus Declaration – proved stillborn: Suspicion of Saudi dominance, coupled with fears that the presence of Syrian and Egyptian forces as part of the force could prove destabilizing to the monarchies of the Gulf were enough to scupper the initiative. But more nuanced understandings of security regimes and how they might operate within the context of the Middle East have been developed elsewhere.

Three decades ago and building on the work of Jervis, Stein (1985) looked to apply the concept of a security regime to understanding the broad contours of the Arab-Israeli conflict. She claimed that zero-sum competition no longer defined this conflict; rather, the interests of Israel and its Arab neighbors were neither “wholly competitive or compatible,” leading to a process of conflict management where all sides recognized the rules of a game and the underlying principle of reciprocity involved. For Inbar and Sandler (1995, pp. 43-45) however, reciprocity alone was insufficient to account for the relative stability of ties between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Stein, they argued, underestimated the role that deterrence played in the relationship and in particular, through its exercise of overwhelming military power, the extent to which Israel saw its regional-strategic position and interests as configured around maintaining this status quo. This led them to argue that Israel’s relations with the wider Arab world were best defined as a *laissez faire* security regime: order was maintained through the distribution of military power which privileged Israel and the emergence of a decentralized deterrence relationship. This ensured the acceptance, however reluctant, by other actors of the clear limitations of using force to change the regional configuration of power. Finally, Inbar and Sandler (1995, pp. 43-45) concluded that such

*laissez faire* regimes lack the institutionalization and formal concordance that defined the construct of security regimes as defined by Jervis; even so, they are no less real for that.

The characterization of security regimes as *laissez faire* is, however, problematic. The primacy placed on deterrence as the dominant condition of the regime tells us very little about the level and type of interaction between the actors involved. If the *laissez faire* regime is defined by a search for security *from* one another rather than *with* one another, it remains limited concerning other types and forms of interaction, notably co-operative behavior, that underpins constructs of a security regime. While accepting that rules can be informal and norms implied, they remain integral to a regime even if deterrence remains the bedrock of state interaction. Moreover, by emphasizing the idea of the status quo, how regional security regimes change and adapt remains unclear, not least when *laissez faire* regimes built on the basis of deterrence are faced by broader existential threats.

The need therefore to understand the actual interaction between erstwhile protagonists is crucial to embedding our understanding of a security regime as more than just a progeny of deterrence. The work of Klieman (1995) in relation to Israel's ties with Jordan prior to the signing of the peace treaty in 1994 offers a more appropriate conceptual point of departure. Acknowledging, like Inbar and Sandler, that the study of international regimes often eschews "the traditionally normative, legalistic-formulistic and institutional focus on treaty alliances, the United Nations and multilateral organisations," Klieman (1995) placed the emphasis upon those areas of co-operation where "actor expectations converge" (p.127).

Taking this as his point of departure, Klieman went on to develop the idea of a "tacit" international security regime, a paradigm he described as "non-superpower, non-hegemonic, non-Western, non-contractual and non-institutionalised cooperation." (Klieman, 1995, p. 129)

[T]he Israel-Jordan regime, although not entirely "unspoken or wordless," does arise and operate without any "express contract". The regime does possess the requisite



collection of rights and rules, *however these are unwritten and uncodified. ....Signals and subtleties are exchanged more often than not behind the scenes, between the lines, and under the table, via back channels involving indirect but also direct communication* [emphasis added]. (Klieman, 1995, p.130)

While the maintenance of national security understood in its hierarchical sense remains the prime goal of such a regime, it is not the only “good” to be realized from the regime; neither, importantly, does it preclude continued competition in a different realm, be it political or economic (Klieman, 1995, p. 130). There are however important caveats to be noted: Klieman’s TSR was configured around a bi-lateral relationship rather than multilateral ties with a range of actors. Does the model therefore capture the complexity of the various interactions among and between Israel and the Gulf states? Secondly, the type of regime that emerged between Israel and Jordan was aided by a shared land border which enabled other “goods” to be realized beyond mitigating the mutual concerns regarding Palestinian nationalism. To what extent therefore is the durability of the regime a function of geographical proximity? Thirdly, can a TSR, particularly in a globalized age, have enduring appeal if it remains configured around the maintenance primarily of one “good,” that is the containment of Iran, rather than a more nuanced understanding of wider security concerns that could range from environmental degradation through to energy security?

We note that that the contours of such a regime are certainly apparent in at least some facets of relations between Israel and the Gulf states but with one important innovation: While the idea of the “unwritten” and the “uncodified” defined the clandestine nature of Klieman’s TSR, the construct of the TSR between Israel and the Gulf states allows for multiple modes of engagement – some of it open – between the actors involved. As such, our construct of the TSR as it applies to Israel and the Gulf states is defined by the following: That geographical proximity need not determine the scope and varying intensity of the modes and means of exchange – be they strategic, political, or economic – between the actors involved. That the regime itself is a function of shared perception of threat – in this case Iran

– rather than *primarily* geared towards managing relations as Inbar and Sandler (1995) noted between the states themselves. This highlights ongoing competition in other areas, co-operation in others but with the important caveat that the regime itself mitigates excess competition to ensure the core aim of the regime is realized: the containment of Iran. Actors involved in the TSR recognize ideational, even emotive factors derived from domestic legitimacy constrain moves towards more progressive ties, an important correction perhaps to the dominance hitherto exercised by classical Realist accounts regarding the structural causation of security regimes across the international system. That the intimacy of the regime reflects subjective perceptions surrounding great power commitment to the security of the actors involved, the United States in particular. That other modes and means of exchange, while limited, do mark relations between the erstwhile protagonists, not least in areas of mutual business and commercial interest (Ravid, 2016a; “Israeli official praises Saudi King,”). That the regime allows for open yet subtle signals to be exchanged that over time engenders public acceptance of more substantive dialogue and the exchange of strategic and political goods. This allows the regime to change and adopt as ideational context dictates: It is not static. It is the exploration and substantive analysis of these themes that in an increasingly fragmented Middle East, highlight the growing importance of security regimes in general, and the TSRs in particular as appropriate frameworks in understanding wider shifts in the regional dispensation of power.

### ***Israel and the Gulf states: Understanding the Context of the TSR***

That Israel has ties with a variety of actors – both state and non-state - across the Middle East spanning several decades is no secret.; nor has geographical distance proved an insurmountable impediment to these ties. Faced with the animus of a largely hostile Arab and

Muslim Middle East upon its establishment, Israel looked to a series of clandestine ties with minority groups such as the Kurds in northern Iraq and Christian tribes in Southern Sudan, but also with state actors – most notably Ethiopia, Turkey and Iran – as a means of weakening the idea of a united Arab front against the nascent Jewish state. The *Torat Ha'periphria* or Periphery Doctrine was the brainchild of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, and met with considerable success (but also tragedy in the case of Lebanon) as Israel looked to secure its position as a permanent fixture among the wider constellation of Middle East States (Alpher, 2015, pp. 38-39).

Throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s however such contacts (including those of a clandestine nature) appear to have been the exception rather than the rule. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 and the widespread opprobrium it faced from across the Arab world followed by the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in December 1987, underscored an entrenched regional antipathy towards Jerusalem (Podeh, 2015, pp. 157-168). Indeed, these events appeared to condemn the so called Fahd plan – named after the then Saudi Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud and launched in June 1981 – before it could gain any credible traction among the regional actors. Its significance was however more subtle: while it championed the right of return of Palestinian refugees, full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories captured in the June 1967 war and the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state, it did recognize, albeit implicitly, that Israel was part of the Middle East state system and could co-exist peacefully with its neighbors. (Kostiner, 2009, pp. 417-429).

For successive Israeli governments however, the insistence by Arab interlocutors on the right of return as a pre-requisite for negotiations, rather than as an issue to be decided in any wider regional peace talks has remained a red-line: Should that right be realized, demographics alone would dictate the end of Israel as a predominantly Jewish state. Pre-occupied with the bloody morass of the Iran-Iraq war and faced with the utter rejection by

Damascus of any opening to the “Zionist entity,” the Fahd plan soon fell into abeyance. Subsequent attempts to revise the plan came to naught: it was only under the auspices of the historic Madrid Peace Conference convened in the aftermath of the 1990-1991 Gulf War and the signing in September 1993 of the Oslo Accords that any progress was made in developing more tangible ties between Israel and the Gulf states (Rosman-Stollman, 2006). In the hope if not expectation that the accords would portend a wider deal between Israel and the PLO resulting in full statehood for the Palestinians, most Gulf states lifted the secondary boycott against Israel. This had prevented companies operating across the region doing business with the Jewish state. For Jerusalem the lifting of the secondary boycott was a landmark achievement: It allowed substantial capital investment to flow in to Israel from a range of multinational companies eager to exploit spin-offs from its high-technology military-industrial base and the mass volume of highly educated immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Reed, 2015).

By 1996, Israel had established two trade missions to Muscat and Doha while the late Yossi Sarid, as Minister for Environment in the government of Yitzhak Rabin, headed an official Israeli delegation to Bahrain in 1994 as part of a wider multilateral accord on environmental co-operation that developed out of the Madrid Peace Conference three years earlier. For a short period of time, the Oslo process opened a window on the possibility of new regional horizons for Israel, a window whose latch had been the Israel’s ties with the Palestinians. As Sarid reported back to the Knesset,

The Bahraini foreign minister asked me to convey a message of peace to the people of Israel, his determination and desire to see the peace process succeed, and to establish economic co-operation with Israel. He viewed the meeting (of the environmental

working group) as the first in a number of stages that would lead to closer relations between the two countries. (Goren, 2015)

The promise that these low level ties might translate into more tangible diplomatic assets soon foundered on the increasingly fractious nature of Israel's relationship with the Palestinians, culminating with the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000. Amid the carnage visited by Palestinian suicide bombers on Israel's streets, and the inevitable human cost of retribution exacted by Israel against the various Palestinian militias, any hope of progressing ties with Qatar and Oman appeared stillborn. Muscat quietly shut the Israeli trade mission in response to the violence although, the Qataris proved more resistant. It was only after sustained pressure from both Riyadh and Tehran who threatened to boycott a meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference then under the Chairmanship of the Qataris, that Doha somewhat reluctantly closed the Israeli office in November 2000. Still, as Uzi Rabi notes, the Qataris continued to hold a series of meetings with Israeli officials, including the then Israeli foreign ministers Shlomo Ben-Ami and Silvan Shalom in Geneva and Paris respectively (Rabi, 2009, pp. 451-452).

The shared position of Tehran and Riyadh on this issue was as much to do with playing the card of anti-Israeli feeling in the wider court of Arab-Muslim opinion as it was from any sense of fidelity to the advancing the Palestinian cause. Wider regional eddies related directly to the fallout from the attacks of 9/11 and later on, the 2003 Iraq war soon overshadowed the ongoing al-Aqsa intifada. The war and consequent insurgency that bedeviled attempts to resurrect anything resembling a coherent state in Iraq created a vacuum increasingly filled by sectarian interests backed by competing regional powers. King Abdullah II of Jordan may have sounded alarmist when, in 2004, he expressed fears of an emerging "Shi'i crescent," comprising both state and non-state actors that now stretched

from Tehran to Beirut; for the Gulf states however, the warning from the Hashemite monarch carried a keenly felt veracity (“The Shia Crescendo,” 2015).

This growing antipathy towards Iran and its sponsorship of its Shi’a surrogates among the capitals of the Gulf and with it a discernible shift in attitudes towards Israel surfaced most visibly during the 2006 Lebanon war. While mindful of the image of heroic resistance against the Zionist aggressor that Hezbollah enjoyed across the Arab world, Riyadh made clear its displeasure with the rash actions of the *al-Muqawama* (the armed wing of Hezbollah) that had precipitated the conflict. The Saudi government announcement condemning the “reckless adventurism” of the movement and that such adventurism was liable to “bring ruination down on all the Arab states” came as an unpleasant surprise to the Hezbollah leadership amid the wider approbation it had hitherto enjoyed on the Arab street. (Harel & Issacharoff, 2008, p. 102).

Partly because of fears of surrounding the recrudescence of Iranian inspired influence across the Middle East, and partly because of lingering sensitivity to accusations that Saudi Arabia remained an incubator of extremism given the identity of 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11, Riyadh had, even before the 2006 conflagration looked to actively promote a more moderate image of the Wahhabi state across the world (Kostiner, 2005, pp. 353-354). By championing a peace initiative that looked to broker an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, Riyadh hoped to ameliorate these concerns and at the same time, shore up its influence among Sunni Arabs increasingly uneasy at the emerging dispensation of power in Iraq as well as Lebanon. The announcement of the Abdullah plan in February 2002, named after the then Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, has therefore to be seen in this context.

The plan balanced full Arab recognition of the Jewish state against Israeli withdrawal from the territories captured and occupied following the June 1967 war. Some in Israel

remained keen to explore the idea but its appeal remained limited and perhaps even politically toxic amid the ever increasing bloodshed of the al-Aqsa intifada. Moreover, its inclusion of UN Resolution 194, championing the right of return of Palestinian refugees, was seen by its critics for what it really was: denial of Israel's right to exist as a predominantly Jewish dispensation (Teitelbaum, 2009). The plan was greeted however with diplomatic plaudits in the capitals of Europe and even informed the "Road Map," the moribund peace initiative launched by President George W. Bush. Despite the consequent vicissitudes of Israeli-Palestinian relations including Jerusalem's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the 2006 Lebanon war, the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007 and a series of Israeli military operations into Gaza strip itself from 2008 onwards, what is now more widely known as the Arab Peace Initiative (API) has remained on the table. Writing in *The Washington Post* in July 2009, Shaykh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain championed the API as the only means by which to mitigate a conflict that "needlessly impoverishes Palestinians and endangers Israel's security." (Hamad Al-Khalifa, 2009) The article was significant for two reasons: the explicit recognition by an Arab state of Israel's genuine security concerns expressed in an influential publication and secondly, the view that such an article, despite being authored by a leading member of the al-Khalifa dynasty, was most likely approved by Bahrain's suzerainty, Saudi Arabia.

As noted, such sentiment was indicative of a more benign attitude towards Israel that had begun to emerge following the Lebanon war. The Deputy Director of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ya'acov Hadas-Handelsman, opined to his American colleagues that Israel's views of Iran, Syria, and Hamas were now shared by many of the Gulf states, with Tehran's regional ambitions the root cause of much of the turmoil across the region. With Washington experiencing its own difficulties with Iranian backed Shi'a militias in Iraq, there is a sense that the Israeli was playing to the gallery. Even so, Hadas-Handelsman warned that

a pervasive feeling among the Gulf capitals was that the United States appeared no longer able or willing to extend effective security guarantees to the Gulf states and as such, friendly ties with Tehran were not a choice but a necessity. Quoting an unnamed Gulf official in close contact with Jerusalem, the Israeli diplomat went on to note that, “Our target [Iran] is mutual but we beg to differ on how to achieve it [countering its military power].” (Wikileaks, 2007)

Having become pre-occupied with fighting two bloody military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the perception – if not the reality – that the United States was becoming increasingly wary (as well as weary) of further military commitments across the Middle East appeared pervasive among the Gulf states. These perceptions in turn had begun to influence attitudes towards both Iran and Israel even before the onset of the Arab spring. Jerusalem was never so naïve enough to ascribe unity of purpose to the position of the Gulf states; Oman and Qatar in particular remained outliers in their public endorsement of close ties with Tehran. But behind closed doors, the Qataris were apparently convinced that only the threat of military action could curtail Tehran’s regional ambition and nuclear program, the scope and scale of which Iran had only revealed under much duress from the international community (Eiran, 2015, p.63). Now, fear of unchecked Iranian intrigue emboldened by a nuclear program designed to underpin those self-same goals increased concern that Washington, DC now looked to lessen its commitment to the security of the Gulf. From 2009 onwards Israel’s relations with individual member states of the GCC emerged increasingly from the shadows and with it, the contours of a TSR whose realm was not contingent on geographical proximity or crucially, the development of normative principles designed to regulate the behavior of the actors involved.

### *The Contours of the Tacit Security Regime*



The dominant variable that has pushed the Gulf states and Israel towards a TSR was a shared perception of Iran's growing regional power and, as our framework notes, the primary importance of protecting one "good" – national security – above all else. Ideational constraints remain important but the contours of the TSR that now emerged demonstrated how "unwritten and uncodified" rules begun to shape the interactions of the actors involved. These relations were extensive, sometimes hidden but occasionally subjected to a wider regional gaze.

While perception of the *level* of threat facing the Gulf states was by no means uniform, historical antipathies, inter-regional rivalries and geographical proximity to Iran proved important variables. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs was acutely aware of growing unease among the Gulf states over what they saw as an increased willingness on the part of the United States to engage with Iran. At a time when the incumbent President in Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was hardly expressing his devotion to an American-Iranian rapprochement, this new trajectory in United States diplomacy under Barack Obama, at least from a Gulf perspective, appeared ill-thought through. By 2009, the scope and intensity of ties between Israel and the Gulf states had increased markedly. In March that year, during discussions with the Acting US Secretary for Near East Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, Hadas-Handelsman again reported back on discussions he has held in secret with several Gulf interlocutors:

[T]he Gulf Arabs believe in Israel's role because of the perception of Israel's close relationship with the U.S but also due to their sense that they can count on Israel against Iran. They believe Israel can work magic....When considering a tri-lateral U.S-Israel-GCC partnership, Hadas[Handelman] suggested we bear in mind that Iran's nuclear programme is the primary source of concern to the U.S and Israel, while the Gulf Arabs also worry about Iran for a host of historic and sectarian reasons (Wikileaks, 2009).

The Israeli diplomat conceded that progress on the Palestinian track would help ease a more public engagement with the Jewish state across the Gulf but Hadas-Handelman

pushed the line that progress, while desirable, “[s]hould not be the sum total of Israel’s relations with the Arab world” upon which everything else was contingent. Israel was therefore content for relations to remain at least partially veiled because the price to be paid for the security benefits to be gained could be purchased for very little domestic political cost: in short, pressure to compromise with the Palestinians and the inevitable backlash from right wing and religious-nationalists this would inevitably draw was largely removed from the diplomatic equation (Inbari, 2012, pp.130-150). Instead, Israel could in practice compartmentalize its relations with particular Gulf states precisely because, as Hadas-Handelman noted, the shared fears over Iranian regional designs created a hierarchy of values within the TSR that trumped any immediate desire among the Gulf states to push the Arab peace initiative.

The gains Israel accrued in the capitals of the Arab Gulf however were seemingly put at risk for short term tactical gain when, in the spring of 2010, Israeli intelligence officers were believed to have carried out the assassination of the Hamas security chief, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in a Dubai hotel (Raviv & Melman, 2012, pp.302-308). But while the killing was met with almost ritual condemnation across the region and indeed much of Europe, such reaction was almost choreographed for domestic consumption. In as much as there can be diplomatic fall-out between states who have no official ties, it was surprisingly short-lived. This validates a defining elements of the TSR: A recognition and acceptance that while it does not inhibit actors towards a particular type of action, the regime does mitigate friction resulting from such acts. Furthermore, it allows cooperation in other realms to develop and continue.

One such realm is the Middle East Desalination Research Centre (MEDRC) based in Muscat. An organization that has set out to realize an epistemic community dedicated to addressing water scarcity across the Middle East, the MEDRC was established in 1996 as a

direct result of the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords. Even though Muscat had forced the closure of the Israeli trade mission in 2000, the continued participation of Israeli scientists has remained integral to the Research Centre, allowing in the process Israeli diplomats to meet with their Omani and Qatari counterparts under the auspices of the Centre's collaborative ventures (Ravid, 2009b). More recently, through the offices of another such IGO, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) based in the UAE, Israel has been able to open a bureau in Abu Dhabi staffed by three diplomats, a sure sign that any lingering enmity towards Jerusalem following the al-Mabhouh affair has long since abated. (Shazaf & Donaghy, 2016). Such ventures validate a wider point of our framework: that while configured around the maintenance primarily of a "strategic good," the TSR defined here can and does encompass other modes of official exchange between the actors involved that can push back against the wider ideational constraints.

Underpinning such ties with the UAE has been a concomitant increase in trade and other commercial ties, an important component of TSR that highlight co-operation in other realms. The Israeli Bureau of Statistics disclosed that in 2013 alone, Jerusalem exported some \$5.3 million worth of goods and services to the UAE, although most informed observers believe that the total was much higher because of the use of made of companies in third countries, most notably Jordan. One study has suggested that from 2003-2011, trade with the GCC states amounted to over \$500 million annually (Gal, 2012). Notable in this regard has been Israeli involvement in the sale of the "Falcon Eye" surveillance system as well as advanced cyber – security software purchased from Israel by the Emiratis in 2015 (Shezaf & Donaghy, 2016; Bergman, 2016).

The comparative advantage Israel enjoys in the fields of security and intelligence is one that has a clear appeal for some of the dynastic monarchies who, while acknowledging the need for domestic reform, remained keen to mitigate any wider undercurrents of internal

social unrest. Even before the Arab uprisings, Israel had developed links with Bahrain through the Mossad. Such were the intimacy of such contacts that the Bahraini monarch, Hamad ibn Isa al-Khalifa instructed officials in Manama to refrain from reference to the “Zionist entity” or the “enemy,” derogatory nomenclature used to refer to Israel more widely across the Arab world (Melman, 2011; Wasser, 2013).

Evidence too exists that this wider acceptance (though not embrace of Jews and Israel) has a wider traction across the region. As the eighth annual Arab Youth Survey highlighted most clearly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ranked only seventh when young Arabs were asked to identify the biggest challenges now facing the Middle East with Israel only eliciting a mention by name on just two occasions (Arab Youth Survey, 2016). At the very least, such sentiment portends wider Gulf Arab acceptance of elite dialogue, an important variable as noted in our framework in legitimizing a more substantive exchange of both political and strategic goods between the regime actors. As important as such ties and indeed sentiments are to Jerusalem however, their level and intensity is ultimately contingent on the position of Saudi Arabia and the extent to which Riyadh has been willing to confront its own Wahhabi religious establishment – which has long regarded Israel as an apostasy – in its effort to construct a broader front against Tehran.

### ***Israel and Saudi Arabia***

As the key actors in the evolution of the TSR, both Israel and Saudi Arabia have embraced not just the “unwritten” and “uncodified” of Klieman’s definition, but increasingly the more open if subtle signals between key actors whose importance is more than just the symbolism of the act: rather, as noted in our framework, the regime has engendered over time a public acceptance of more open, even substantive exchange of

strategic and political goods, thereby allowing the regime to change and adapt as ideational context dictates.

Over the last five years, influential Saudis have certainly come to be more open in their dealings with Israel, approaches that have been noteworthy for the absence of any rancor. Prince Turki al-Faisal-al Saud, former head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate for 24 years and later on, ambassador to both the court of St James and Washington used an interview with the *Financial Times* in March 2014 to acknowledge Israel's intelligence services as "[T]he most professional, although they've committed a lots of mistakes. But they do accomplish their missions." (Luce, 2014) Just two months later, in an event hosted in Brussels by the German Marshall Fund, the Saudi shared a platform with the former head of Israeli military intelligence and current director of the Institute for National Security Studies, Major General Amos Yadlin, primarily to discuss the Arab Peace Initiative. The importance of the event was in its political symbolism as it was streamed live to a global audience, breaking a long held taboo that any Saudi, let alone one identified so closely with the ruling family, could ever appear in public with their erstwhile foe. While Prince Turki continued to champion the Arab Peace Initiative and with it, tangible progress to be made on issues related to refugees, borders and the status of Jerusalem, his appearance was actually of a piece with a discernible if low-key Saudi 'intellectual' engagement with Israel that eschewed the crude stereotype and epithets of previous years. For example, another senior member of the ruling dynasty, Brigadier-General Naef Bin Ahmed al-Saud, published a detailed appreciation of the challenges – social, political and security related – now facing the Jewish State. Of particular note in his essay was its thinly veiled support for Israel's response to pro-Palestinian activists trying to break the siege of the Gaza. Drawing parallels with the decision of Riyadh to offer military support to the Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain, al-Saud noted that, "When foreigners aim to influence events under a particular

nation's control, whether by social media or otherwise, that nation may take it upon itself to expel or repel such foreigners.” (Ahmed al-Saud, 2012; Oren, 2012)

For the Saudis, the events that led to their intervention in Bahrain were less an expression of the majority Shi'ite population demanding greater political and social rights, and more the manifestation of Iranian meddling among their co-religionists to further their wider regional designs. Such perceptions informed their view of Tehran's nuclear program with the fear that its apogee would be realized in the establishment of Iran as the dominant hegemon throughout the Gulf. According to a leaked diplomatic cable, it was for this reason alone that the late Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, urged Washington, DC in 2010 to sever the head of the “Iranian snake” (“US Embassy cables,” 2010). The advent of the Arab Uprisings and with it, the fragmentation of many of the old Republican autocracies into their many sectarian and religious parts, served to fuel the perception of Iran's malfeasance and in turn, determined a more pro-active Saudi policy across the region. While this has come to be realized in Riyadh's support for a range of non-state armed groups fighting both the Islamic State (also known as Daesh) and Iranian sponsored proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, from 2009 the Saudis began to openly align their concerns over the Iranian nuclear with those of Israel (Ben Yishai, 2015).

This synergy was apparent in the warm accolades accorded Binyamin Netanyahu in some Saudi media outlets following his speech before the United States Congress on 3 March 2015. While conceding there was much that still divided Israel from the Arab world, Faisal Abbas, a senior journalist with *al-Arabiya*, a Saudi owned news channel wrote that irrespective of such differences “one must admit, Bibi did get it right, at least when it came to dealing with Iran.” (“Netanyahu's Congress speech,” 2015) It was an open acknowledgment that Netanyahu's consistent public opposition to any agreement that left Iran in possession of a viable nuclear breakout capability enjoyed Riyadh's affirmation, and

was very much in line with the belief expressed by Hadas-Handelsman that because of the perceived leverage that Jerusalem could exercise across Washington, it was in effect doing the diplomatic bidding for the Gulf states.

This was a vocal expression of core elements of the TSR typology outlined: The containment of Iran as a regional threat; that shared subjective perception surrounding the position of the United States; and that clear signals regarding the position taken by one party to the regime – in this case Israel – enjoyed the support of other actors. Of course, antipathy towards Israel remains strong among influential Saudis (Friedman, 2015). At the end of 2015, the most senior cleric in the Kingdom, Shaykh Abdulaziz al-Shaykh even stated that the so called “Islamic state” was in reality an adjunct of the Israeli army. While clearly removed from any meaningful reality, such statements are indicative that the scope and intensity of even a tacit relationship has finite boundaries (Riedel, 2015; “Saudi Arabia denies,” 2014).

The broader question however is that having failed to scupper the Iran deal in Congress, has this convinced the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia included, that Israel’s influence in Washington, DC is less than its supposed many parts? The answer for now can be given in the negative, not least because both Israel and the Gulf states continue to share a malign view of Iranian influence throughout the region that remains at the evolutionary core of the TSR. For example, Israeli coverage of the war in Yemen invariably ascribes the success of the Houthi tribal militias to the support of Tehran and has evinced little criticism over the conduct of the Saudi led air campaign that has yet to achieve any real tangible military or political gains for its ousted surrogate, President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi (Ziv, 2015; Bergman & Stark, 2015; Friedman, 2016b). Equally, the reluctance of the Obama Administration to offer more forthright leadership across the region helped nurture and sustain a mutual acceptance “towards particular types of action” as part of the evolving

nature of TSR. This suggests that in light of Washington, DC's apparent retrenchment, the symbiotic nature of the TSR, not least in the field of public and "soft" diplomacy outlined will likely endure. The evidence for this, both tangible and inferred, is persuasive.

In December 2015, the former Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Dore Gold, disclosed to the Saudi news website *Elaph*, at the end of 2015 that Israel had prevented SA-22 anti-aircraft missiles reaching the hand of Hezbollah, and concluded his interview by noting that

We [Israel and the Gulf States] have common interests regarding the Iranian threat, not only Tehran's nuclear programme, but also Iran's activities on the ground, and its repeated attempts to use the Shiite sect in the Arab world, to make them a fifth column among those states. (Kas, 2015)

Gold had already made headlines that summer when, on the eve of assuming his appointment he had shared the stage with former Saudi General Anwar Eshki in an event organized under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC. The Saudi remained keen to promote the API as the basis of a wider regional agreement as part of the discussions; most notable however, was the very public accord reached by both men that Iran remained the root cause of instability across much of the Middle East and a threat to their respective interests ("In a very rare public meet," 2015).

With the threat of social unrest across the Arab street still a source of deep concern for Riyadh, measures have been taken to alleviate the economic distress that underpins such popular resentment while enhancing security co-operation. In the case of Egypt, this included the announcement that Saudi Arabia would construct a bridge linking the Saudi mainland with the Sinai peninsula, a deal which saw sovereign control of the tiny islands of Tiran and



Sanafir pass over to Riyadh. In 1967, Israeli sensitivities over access to the Red Sea through the Straits of Tiran presaged the Six Day War. Evidence exists however that Cairo notified Jerusalem of its intent to relinquish control of the islands, a conversation likely to have been coordinated with Riyadh. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, was quick to insist that the deal was struck “without having a relationship or communication with Israel,”; but the strategic sensitivities involved could hardly have seen an agreement reached *without* (our emphasis) Israeli diplomatic benediction being conferred, however discreet, upon the deal (Al-Din, 2016; Cohen, 2016; Barel, 2016). It is perhaps the most tangible manifestation to date of wider interests and shared perceptions of threat that define the mediating role of the TSR between Israel and the Gulf states in realizing shared political and strategic interests which in this case, included shoring up the regime of Egyptian president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi.

Other common interests extend over how to deal with the Hezbollah, now regarded by most member states of the Arab League as a terrorist organisation following a vote by the organisation to label the Lebanese Shi’a organisation as such in February 2016. There is evidence too that popular Saudi opinion has fallen in behind that of the regime regarding Iran and its surrogates. A quite unique telephone opinion poll conducted among the Interdisciplinary Centre (IDC) in Herziliya, Israel in the summer of 2015 found that of the 506 surveyed, 53% thought Iran to be the primary threat to the security of the Kingdom, with only 18% citing Jerusalem. As Dr Alex Mintz who oversaw the IDC survey noted, “What we think here in Israel about the Saudis is not exactly what they are. There is a great identity of interests and threats and agendas ... some would even like to join forces with Israel.” (Times of Israel, 2016)

Such steps are of course unlikely to be realized in the foreseeable future. In public at least, Saudi officials continue to make clear that until or unless Israel is willing to engage

seriously with the API and with it, tangible progress towards realizing Palestinian self-determination, overt ties with Jerusalem will hardly move beyond the symbolic handshakes at academic symposia (Ravid, 2016c). Netanyahu too remains hamstrung, politically as well as ideologically by a domestic constituency unwilling to accept substantive territorial concessions to the Palestinians; over Syria too, Israel and Saudi Arabia hold divergent views. (Inbari 2012) The shared animus towards Hizbollah apart, it is not at all clear that Israel wishes to see the removal of al-Asad (or at least his wider regime), a position at odds with the support given by Saudi Arabia to a plethora of armed Sunni groups.

It is a reality that is understood well by both Saudis and Israelis and accepted as such in the wider context of the shared antipathies towards Tehran but does not preclude, as part of the TSR, competition or divergent interests in other fields. Israel for example, voiced its objection to the sale by Washington, DC of advanced weapons systems to the Gulf states in the aftermath of the Iran nuclear deal, Jerusalem fearing that such sales threatened its qualitative military edge over its neighbors (Ravid, 2016d). For all concerned, the nascent character of the TSR between Israel and the Gulf states has been shaped by its lowest common denominator, the perceived threat from Tehran, while sidestepping perhaps the more intractable issue of Palestinian statehood (Maddy-Weitzmann, 2016). Other areas of co-operation and collaboration do of course exist, the MEDRC being the most notable example. Still, whether overtime the contours of a TSR can foster the confidence building measures that will be required to reach a formal diplomatic treaty satisfactory to all sides will, in truth, be the real test of its leverage beyond the immediate purchase of hard security. For now, all concerned remain the best of adversaries.

### *Conclusion*

The logic of the security dilemma would suggest that at the very least, a formal alliance between Israel and the Gulf states, conditioned by a shared view of Iranian regional intrigue would most likely emerge. That it has failed to do so speaks volumes for the continued hold that the divisive issue of Palestine continues to exercise over the collective Arab conscience as well as internal Israeli political discourse (Al-Faisal & Amidror, 2016). For now however Israeli policy makers believe that the loose institutional framework of the TSR has allowed the individual members to calibrate the level and intensity of ties with Jerusalem, an arrangement favored by Israel but with a recognition that Riyadh holds the whip hand. It may also reflect a continuity of Jerusalem's attitude toward peace in which it has demonstrated a continued preference for conducting bilateral negotiations. Still, improved relations and the benefits that may accrue from such ties remain contingent upon inter-Arab relations, internal GCC politics and progress being made in the Israeli-Palestinians negotiations (Levy & Eichner, 2016; Ravid, 2016e). When coupled with the widely held perception that Washington, DC's military and diplomatic leverage across the region is much diminished, a view unlikely to have been disabused by President Obama's reflections on the trajectory of United States foreign policy under his tenure, it is perhaps unsurprising that shared perceptions of threat have led to increased ties (and open dialogue) between erstwhile foes (Goldberg, 2016). Any attempt, however to force such relations into the limelight would undermine what has been achieved so far. Even so, there is a wide range of policy options between full diplomatic relations and a total lack of contact, and the actors involved can and indeed have taken full advantage of this. Israelis in particular remain keen to highlight the shared interests between Jerusalem and what Major General Herzi Halevy, the serving Head of Israeli military intelligence, has referred to as the "pragmatic Sunni countries" ("Israeli official praises Saudi King," 2016).

Our six defining elements of the TSR that have emerged between Israel and the Gulf states span a range of activities but recognize ultimately that hard security determines the level of engagement. It recognizes too that internal constraints on all sides determine the type and intensity of external engagement, a conceptual observation that challenges a purely realist account of regional power politics devoid of ideational content: There is also a realization that amid the upheaval and fragmentation of much of the Middle East, state based interests still matter and the interests of Jerusalem and Riyadh in this instance perhaps matter the most. Geographical proximity has never been an issue and nor has the multilateral nature of ties between Israel and the Gulf states, precisely because Riyadh's dominance of Gulf security has largely filtered the level of engagement with Israel.

For now, the level and intensity of the ties established relate primarily to Iran; but if the view holds that Washington, DC's diplomatic and military footprint among erstwhile protagonists faced with a wider regional challenge has become increasingly feint, the TSR emerging between Israel and the Gulf states might well provide a template for understanding shifts in alliance patterns across the wider region. Such patterns of engagement are already discernible in Israel's ties with Russia as both parties seek to avoid misunderstandings over Lebanon and Syria while pursuing national security objectives clearly at variance (Barel, 2017). At a time when state sovereignty and legitimacy are increasingly framed by sectarian identities and religious affiliation, the very idea of the TSR or variants thereof will now likely define the modes and means of diplomatic exchange across the Middle East as the regions states continue to chase its most precious yet elusive of prizes: security itself.

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