

NEW PERIOD AND POSSIBLE RESULTS IN THE ISRAELI-GULF RELATIONS

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INSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Sınmaz, Kadriye, "New Period and Possible Results in the Israeli-Gulf Relations",
INSAMER, 24.12.2018.

 Analysis

There was a rapid diplomatic traffic between the Israeli occupation regime and some Gulf States during the month of October 2018. First, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid an official visit to Sultan Qaboos of Oman on October 26, 2018. During the same period, Israel's top gymnasts went to Doha, Qatar to participate in a world championship, and Israel's Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev went along to support the country's judo athletes to compete in a competition held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. It was then, for the first time, the Israeli national anthem was played in a Gulf country, following the success of the Israeli team in winning the gold medal. The image of Regev - a far right politician - crying when the Israeli anthem was playing, and the intimate pictures of him with UAE executives shown on the media painted more than a thousand words, to say the least.

Ministerial level visits were also carried out in Dubai on October 30, 2018, and in Oman on November 7, 2018. And Bahrain is expected to join in and establish an official relationship with Israel in the next coming days. Egypt and Jordan continue their relations with the occupying regime since the peace agreements with Israel was signed by Egypt in 1979 and by Jordan in 1994. Egypt recently signed a \$ 15 billion agreement on natural gas, while increasing its close contacts with Israel regarding the Palestinian issue.

Apart from what happened with Egypt and Jordan in the past, the reason of the Zionist evolution in the Gulf region seems to be related to the changing political strategy of Saudi Arabia. As an essential actor in the region, Saudi Arabia is leading the normalization process with Israel. This can be seen particularly after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at



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the Saudi Arabian Consulate General in Istanbul. Israel, together with the United States' support for the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) clearly showed the rapprochement between the parties at this "normalization" process.

The normalization initiatives between Israel and Arab countries are not new. Although the ongoing relations since the 1993 Oslo Accords seem to be interrupted due to the Second Intifada, it has been maintained secretly.

The partnership of Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia with the Trump administration, the "billions of dollars arms agreement" and "the significance of the Saudis against the Iranian threat" have made MbS indispensable for the United States.¹ It can be deduced that the murder of Khashoggi has ties to a grand regional design just because the only ones who support

Crown Prince MbS after the Khashoggi case are USA and Israel. In fact, the news in the American media reinforces the impression that MbS plays a vital role in the US' new regional policies, which it aims to create together with Israel.,

The normalization initiatives between Israel and Arab countries are not new. Although the ongoing relations since the 1993 Oslo Accords seem to be interrupted due to the Second Intifada, it has been maintained secretly. The only difference now is that the relations are being declared and accelerated. The development of these relations can be categorized in two different issues, namely "the Palestine issue" and the "anti-Iran issue".

"Accelerated normalization" will undoubtedly contribute to Israel's strategies on foreign policy, which can be expressed as "overcoming the fact of regional loneliness and isolation".² Israel, through its strategic partnership with Arab countries, will be able to benefit more from the

natural resources in the Gulf. Moreover, the fact that the Zionist regime is expanding its movement area in the region will further isolate the people living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Israel's developing relationships with Arab countries can pave the way for the authoritarian Arab governments to achieve a "legitimacy" in the international arena, particularly with the support of great powers like the United States. Hence, there lies a relationship that is based on a mutual interest.³

On November 11, 2018, Israel launched a major attack on Gaza while improving its relations with Arab countries. A team of Israeli Special Forces entered the inner parts of Khan Yunus city in northern Gaza, using a civilian vehicle and assassinated Nur Barakeh, a commander of the Izzettin al-Qassam Brigades. Due to the attack, 14 Palestinians were killed, more than 20 Palestinians were wounded and two Israelis were killed. The attack did not last long, because a cease-fire was agreed between the parties on November 13, 2018.

The fact that there was no serious reaction from the Arab countries after the Israeli attack shows that there is a changing tendency in the Palestinian-Israeli issue compared to that in the 1990s. It is safe to say that the Palestinian issue has lost its feature as a priority for Arab countries.⁴ Although it is clear that the sensitivity felt by the society of those countries regarding the Palestinian issue is still going strong.

The desire to establish regional partnerships against Iran also serves as another reason for Israel to establish normalization with the Gulf States. Israel perceives Iran-backed Hezbollah as a major threat to its security. The fact that Hezbollah and some of the groups it supports achieved significant number of seats in Lebanon's parliamentary elections on May 6, not to mention how Lebanon and Iran have been active in the Syrian war, have increased the threat against Israel's national security. In recent months, the mutual attacks between Israel and Iran in Syria have caused the emergence of the "Will the Israel-Iran war take place?" discourse.

Although it is also true that the tension between these two countries have not reached this stage so far.

The Arab block, led by Saudi Arabia, has got into a power struggle with Iran, especially over Yemen and Lebanon. There is a huge humanitarian crisis in Yemen. So much so that many thousands of children's lives in Yemen are threatened because of starvation as we speak.

The developing Israel - Gulf - US relation - especially through US embargo - against Iran is aimed to isolate Iran and to ease the activities of Israel and Arab countries in the region. But Iran

countered this process with the cooperation it established with Russia and in part with Turkey.

At the recent International Transport Conference in Muscat, Oman, Israel introduced a new project, named the "Peace Railway", a railway designed to run from Haifa to Dubai. It is claimed that the route of the main lines and some side branches passing through Jordan, Saudi Arabia and UAE will be an alternative to The Straits of Hormuz and Babu'l-Mendeb.⁵ If the project is successful, the Gulf's rich oil resources will be able to reach the Mediterranean Sea via Israel without encountering any Iranian obstacle in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden.



Endnotes

- ¹ Hakan Çopur, “ABD siyasi tarihinin en kötü örtbas girişimi Kaşıkçı cinayeti”, *AA Analiz*, 22.11.2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/abd-siyasi-tarihinin-en-kotu-ortbas-girisimi-kasikci-cinayeti/1318234>
- ² Ceyhun Çiçekçi, “İsrail’in alenileşen Körfez politikası”, *AA Analiz*, 08.11.2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/israilin-alenilesen-korfez-politikasi/1305866>
- ³ Feras Abu-Helal, “When Regev cried in Abu Dhabi and Netanyahu in Muscat”, *Middle East Monitor*, 30.10.2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181030-when-regev-cried-in-abu-dhabi-and-netanyahu-in-muscat/>
- ⁴ Sultan Barakat, “Normalising relations with Israel will not benefit Gulf states”, *Al Jazeera*, 14.11.2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/normalising-relations-israel-benefit-gulf-states-181114134809202.html>
- ⁵ “İsrail’in Hayfa’dan Dubai’ye uzanan demir yolu projesi”, *AA*, 15.11.2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/israilin-hayfadan-dubaiye-uzanan-demir-yolu-projesi-/1312115>

