

If Netanyahu does not come to the mountain... The GCC countries and their relation with Israel and the Palestinian Territories

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ABSTRACT

The recent visit of the Israeli PM to Oman and Saudi Arabia has put the relations between the GCC countries and Israel in the spotlight. Also, recent events like April's general election in Israel or the impulse of the 'deal of the century' by the Trump administration have forced some countries to take a clear stance.

Three main paths can be observed. The first one, represented by Saudi Arabia or the UAE, follows the directions set by Washington, despite the dissonance between the support of the Palestinian cause and the rapprochement towards Israel. The second one, represented by Kuwait, is defined by a long standing support of the Palestinian Authority, a close relation with its leaders and a large Palestinian diaspora community. The third one includes the de facto recognition of the state of Israel but the funding of parties like Hamas, a stance better represented by Qatar and, to a lesser extent, Oman.

Some early conclusions include that there is not a common stance in the GCC. Instead, every GCC country has its own incentives to determine their policies towards Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Also, the new set of alliances prompted by the MbS and MbZ partnership is redefining some of these positions.

Key words: GCC, Israel, Palestinian Territories, Israel-Gulf relations, Palestinian Authority, Binyamin Netanyahu

INTRO

In October 2018, Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu visited Oman, a country with which Israel has diplomatic ties (Landau and Khoury 2018). This visit is part of a broader trend that has to do not only with the Palestinian conflict, an issue that has been part of the agenda of the Arab countries, but with a reconfiguration of the structure of alliances in the region in which the Arab countries and, more importantly, the GCC countries, are starting to get closer to Israel. The recent Peace to Prosperity conference in Bahrain is a visible example of this trend.

For some, this new set of alliances has to do with the rivalry of these countries with Iran and their relation with the US with the Trump administration (Black 2019). In this sense, as the Special Representative for International Negotiations and one of the key figures of the Trump administration in Israel, Jason Greenblatt, said, "Iran is the center of the problems of the Middle East today—anybody who says the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the core conflict of the Middle East is very mistaken" (Toosi 2019).

In this paper, I will analyse how the rapprochement of Israel and most of the GCC countries has, in fact, a longer history than a mere set of recent events, and that their interest is a two way street - both the GCC countries and Israel benefit from the other. Provided that the Arab countries do not recognise Israel, with the exception of Egypt and Jordan, and do not have

diplomatic or economic relations, this study can be considered an analysis of this difference in the trend. Nevertheless, there have been many contacts over the years by many Arab countries. The study of the GCC countries can be revealing for many reasons.

First of all, the GCC countries have grown in importance in the last years. As Kamrava (2015:2) states, they have become the new centre of gravity of the MENA region, particularly during and after the Arab Springs. Moreover, the change from the Palestinian issue to the Arab Springs as the main problem in the region shows the different agendas that these countries have.

To a certain extent, Egypt's loss of its position as the "spiritual and political leader of the Arab world" (Lenczowski 1956) was motivated by the results of the 1967 war with Israel, when the Palestinian cause was central to any Arab leader. After a period of contested leadership (Kamrava 2015:3), the GCC countries have appeared as the new agenda setters. The perspective of Israel about this is that, as the Israeli ambassador in the US said, "Arab states are no longer dancing to the Palestinians' tune" (Tibon 2018).

The new publicly announced relations of the GCC countries with Israel are a consequence of this shift of preferences caused by the new leadership.

Despite this, there are important differences between the GCC countries. I distinguish three trends in the GCC-Israel relations. The first one, represented by Kuwait, continues without having any diplomatic or economic relations with Israel, following the public demands, which still consider Palestine a central issue. A second one, best exemplified by Qatar or Oman, with different approaches in any case, whose relations with Israel are determined by their mediating attitudes. And the third one, represented by what I have called the MbZ axis (the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), in which Israel is becoming a strategic ally in terms of shared enemies, trade and regional power.

Due to the timing of the events, the sources will rely mostly on recent press releases which account the extent of these reconfiguration of alliances. To understand the reasons behind these countries, I will try to describe the set of incentives that motivate their behaviour.