



## A Covenant of Shadows

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The growing ties between Israel and the region's Sunni Arab states are a result of a divided Middle East where Islamic State poses the greatest threat. But a deal with the Palestinians will be a necessary prerequisite to the forging of formal diplomatic ties.

Many of the world's nations are looking on in surprise and admiration at the ever strengthening ties between Israel and the more important Sunni Arab countries in the region – the open relationships with Egypt and Jordan, with which Israel maintains official diplomatic relations, but also the informal relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates.

This shift appears to be fueled by three main factors. First, these Sunni countries fear Iran's growing power over a Shiite bloc, which threatens the security as well as the unity of the Sunni states. There is an ancient religious conflict between the Sunni majority and the Shiite minority, but the minority enjoys the advantage of a singular leadership that is willing to do anything it can to change the status of Shiites in the Middle East.

This leadership, which sits in Tehran, is spearheading orchestrated and focused efforts to liberate the Shiites in Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and defend the Shiites in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The objective is to create an uninterrupted distribution of Shiites from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut.

Meanwhile, Iran is trying to undermine the Sunni dominance on the Arab side of the Gulf between the Saudi Peninsula and Iran: Saudi Arabia, with its Shiite minority, in the oil-rich region; Bahrain, which underwent a Shiite coup attempt; and Yemen, where Saudi Arabia is fighting with the Sunni majority against the Iranian-backed Houthi minority.

The Sunni-Shiite conflict also has a nationalist aspect. It is impossible to ignore the fact that Iran is focusing its efforts exclusively on Arab countries. This nationalist struggle also manifests itself in inter-Shiite disputes, especially in Iraq, where the city of Najaf was once

considered the most important Shiite city, but has since been replaced by the Iranian city of Qom.

The second factor fueling the Sunni countries' concerns is the threat of extreme Salafism led by the Islamic State. The group's Arabic acronym, Daesh, stands for "the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," but the organization is active in Sinai and Libya as well. It also has active chapters in Africa and in Europe, as the recent wave of terrorist attacks indicates. Therefore, the simple name "Islamic State" may be more apt.

The expansion of the group's activities poses a threat to the Sunni states because they represent an enemy of the highest order. In Egypt, the threat is even more pronounced thanks to IS deployment in parts of Sinai and its collaboration with Hamas, the Palestinian chapter of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – the mortal enemies of the current Egyptian leadership.

In Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Islamic State threatens the regimes from within, because in both countries there is extensive sympathy for the group among various sectors in the population. Even if the coalition of nations currently working to combat IS manages to dramatically diminish the areas under its control in Iraq and Syria, the ideology propagated by the group will still pose a very palpable threat to the Sunni states. Moreover, the coalition is having trouble maintaining its momentum against IS following a string of important victories.

The third factor stems from the general sense that the US has abandoned its allies in their time of need, with the object of scaling back its involvement in the region. In Egypt, this feeling is founded on America's abandonment of deposed President Hosni Mubarak and its consequent appearance of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. The countries in the region were very disappointed with the conduct of the US toward both Mubarak and Syrian President Bashar Assad, who continues to massacre Sunnis uninhibited.

In Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, the frustration stems from the fact that they view the landmark agreement between the West and Iran, spearheaded by the US, as an American capitulation. They realize that not only is the US no longer on their side in the fight against Iran, but the US expects them to make concessions to Iran. It has become clear to the Sunni states, which once viewed the US as a superpower whose mere existence was enough to stop any threat they faced, that things have profoundly changed.

Even if the U.S. is still a superpower, it has lost the will to use its power in the Middle East. Furthermore, when it does exercise its power, as in its leading of the anti-IS coalition, it takes action sparingly and extremely cautiously. And now, the US is compromising with its adversaries, as indicated by the weak American response to Russia's increasing involvement in Syria.

These countries are looking for someone to help them at this time of need. Israel is the only country in the area whose stability is not in question. It is a strong country, both economically and militarily, and it has the ability and willingness to defend its essential interests. This is the foundation for the blossoming relationships between Israel and these

Sunni countries – classic status-quo countries in an ever-shifting region that are looking for an anchor with which to stabilize themselves.

Israel can serve as this anchor. It is a marriage of convenience, not of love, but it is one of increasing importance. Cooperation is key to truly enhancing these relationships, as I was told by a Saudi prince who shared a stage with me at a conference in Washington recently. "The combination of Israeli money and Arab talent can have a positive impact on any region," he said jokingly. But behind this line there was a great truth. Israel can provide these countries with precisely what they lack: security, technology and enormous improvements in the areas of water, agriculture and health.

However, a serious collaboration – a public, unhindered cooperation – between Israel and these Arab states requires a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Not because this issue is dear to the hearts of the Sunni leaders, but because without it, these leaders would lose the support of the street, which is imperative if the relationship is to go public.

Sadly, the Palestinians are in no rush to advance a peace agreement or their relations with Israel. On the contrary: their recognition that they are the key to enhancing Israel's ties with the nations of the region only makes them think more highly of themselves and prompts them to ratchet up their demands.

The only way to overcome this hurdle is to change the order of the steps. First, build a relationship that will serve as an inclusive umbrella for Israelis and Sunni Arabs, and then lead the Palestinians into it to engage in peace negotiations.

Unlike in the past, the enhancement of relations is now no less important to the Sunnis than it is to the Israelis. But the Palestinian obstacle is in the way. It is not clear whether the Arab nations will be able to overcome this obstacle, despite their interest. Israel needs to think about ways it can help them overcome it, as this could be a historic opportunity and it would be a shame to squander it.

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