



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Israel Should Keep a Low Profile on the Khashoggi Case

by Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,016, November 26, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An Israeli-Saudi “alliance of convenience” has been developing over the course of many years – but now that the brazen murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has called the US-Saudi relationship into question, Israel needs to be careful how it casts its own relationship with Riyadh in the months ahead.

The October 2 murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul has put Israel’s leaders in a delicate position.

For many years now, and with increasing intensity since Iran stepped up efforts to get a nuclear weapon, an Israeli-Saudi quasi-alliance has developed over Iran and other common regional interests, such as opposing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere. This had made Riyadh and Jerusalem what political scientist Evan Resnick has termed “allies of convenience,” if not “allies of conviction.”

There have been dozens of overt meetings between former officials from both countries and reports of many more covert meetings. This developing relationship has likely led to intelligence cooperation and coordination on myriad issues, and perhaps even on anti-ballistic missile defense. With the assumption of office by President Donald Trump in January 2017 and the appointment of Muhammad bin Salman as Crown Prince in June of that year, this relationship has grown even closer, as all protagonists seemed to be on the same page regarding confronting Iran.

This relationship has many additional benefits for Jerusalem, chief among them that Israel can claim that it is accepted in the Middle East despite the festering

issue of the West Bank and Gaza, while the Saudis may have hoped that the devoted pro-Israel faction in the Trump administration, led by son-in-law Jared Kushner, Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and Middle East peace envoy Jason Greenblatt, would look out for Riyadh in Washington.

But now that the brazen murder of Jamal Khashoggi has called the US-Saudi relationship into question, Israel needs to be careful how it casts its own relationship with Riyadh in the months ahead. Israel's response has not garnered much attention, but an op-ed by *Washington Post* deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl bore the headline, "Why is Israel tossing a lifeline to Jamal Khashoggi's killers?" (Diehl is not known for being anti-Israel.)

Official Israel was quite circumspect in the days after Khashoggi's disappearance, issuing no statements. But ex-officials with close links to the Netanyahu government, such as former Deputy National Security Adviser for Foreign Policy and International Affairs, Eran Lerman, told the *Jerusalem Post*, "It is certainly not in our interest to see the status of the Saudi government diminished in Washington." Lerman praised the Saudis, noting that they "even more so than us in some ways, have turned the American position on Iran. This is central and uppermost in our list of priorities, and so to have a Saudi government held in high regard in Washington is very much in our interest." Netanyahu confidante and former director general of the Foreign Ministry Dore Gold expressed his concern that the incident "could be used by the Iranians to drive a wedge between the West and Saudi Arabia," which would be bad for Israel, since "anything that strengthens Iran's posture in the Middle East is bad for Israel."

Finally, after a month, perhaps in consultation with Washington, the Netanyahu government laid its cards on the table. The PM called the murder a "horrendous act that should be duly dealt with. But at the same time, it is very important for the stability of the region and the world that Saudi Arabia remain stable...the larger problem I believe is Iran."

Israel's Ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, said nearly the same thing. In a reflection of how concerned the Israelis are about their and the US relationship with Saudi Arabia, Dermer said, remarkably, "We should not allow an action like that to go unanswered. But we also have to be careful about not throwing away a relationship that has strategic value."

"I think the administration, when they know all the facts, are going to have to decide, how can they on the one hand make clear that this action is unacceptable, but also not throw out the prince with the bathwater, let's put it that way."

It appears the administration has followed the Israeli playbook. On November 20, President Trump issued what he hoped would be the final word on the

murder: “Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn’t!” In any case, he concluded, there were numerous benefits to be derived from the relationship with Saudi Arabia by the US – and by Israel.

Israeli leaders may feel comfortable staying on the same page with the administration on this matter, but bipartisan support for seriously sanctioning Saudi Arabia is gaining steam in Congress. The charge is being led not only by Democrats in the newly Democratic-majority House of Representatives, but also by staunchly pro-Israel Republican senators, including Lindsay Graham. Graham is a cosponsor of a bipartisan bill, the Saudi Arabia Accountability and Yemen Act of 2018, which seeks, *inter alia*, “meaningful accountability for the murder of ...Jamal Khashoggi.” Republican Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Bob Corker tweeted: “I never thought I’d see the day a White House would moonlight as a public relations firm for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.” Following Trump’s absolution of Muhammad bin Salman, Corker and Ranking Member Democrat Bob Menendez invoked the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, requiring that the President determine within 120 days “whether Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is responsible for Mr. Khashoggi’s murder.”

Trump’s position on the murder risks becoming the signature issue of his presidency. Sure, all countries need to balance their policies between interests and values – Israel no less than America. But giving a murderer such a public pass may go beyond the pale. Does Israel really want to carry water in Washington for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia? To do so risks Israel’s moral standing. Jerusalem needs to consider if it is worth the price.

Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum, an expert on the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and pan-Arab issues, teaches in the department of Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family