



PERSPECTIVES

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Foreign Intervention in Israel's Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A number of senior security officials, including ISA (Shabak) chief Nadav Argaman and several Israeli cyber consultants, have taken note recently of apparent attempts by several foreign countries to interfere in the upcoming Israeli elections via cyber and IW (Information Warfare) attacks. Below the radar, there is evidence that at least one country – Saudi Arabia – may be attempting to interfere via more traditional methods.

Ever since Russia's IW assault on the American political system in 2016 and its less successful attempt to manipulate the French elections, hacking, fake news, bots, and trolls are what come to mind regarding attempts to illicitly manipulate elections and affect democracies' public discourse.

The success of such means, and the fact that they have captured the public imagination, should not allow us to assume that the more traditional methods of influencing another country's political system have gone out of circulation. They may be out of fashion but they still exist, and countries are still making good use of them.

“Traditional” refers to hiring PR teams, advertising agencies, and policy advocacy and lobbying companies to promote a country's interests and agenda, both diplomatic and economic. In addition, it not infrequently includes funding politicians, and sometimes a particular party as well.

A foreign country hiring a lobbyist or a PR agency is not a problem in a democratic society, as long as the country in question is not considered a hostile power and has diplomatic relations with the country it is trying to influence. Some countries require that a company or consultant hired by a foreign country register as a foreign agent, but as long as regulations are adhered to, there is no legal problem.

Providing funding is something else. The US and all other major western powers have strict campaign finance laws designed to prevent covert injection of funds from unclear sources into political campaigns.

No country has made more extensive use of both these methods than Saudi Arabia. It hires the best lawyers, lobbyists, and advertising agencies money can buy (or at least rent) in the US, Britain, and other countries of interest to them.

In the pre cyber-IW era, when these were the only effective means by which to interfere in another country's elections, Israel was relatively safe from attempts by hostile powers in this regard. Only the US and the EU attempted in the past to affect Israeli elections via such means. This was done primarily via funding of campaigns, party institutions, and NGOs/PACs affiliated with particular sides they were interested in helping. Since such interference could not be done by governmental agencies, it was done via a tangled web of NGOs that directly and indirectly funneled funds to pertinent local NGOs.

Despite its willingness to meddle in other countries' political systems via the above-mentioned means, Saudi Arabia never attempted to target Israel, despite the allure of manipulating the political system of a sworn enemy. Its antipathy to Israel was so strong that it refused to do anything that would require any kind of contact with it, despite the potential gains. The kingdom ignored pleas from Jordan, Egypt, and the PA to provide them with funding to influence Israeli politics in this way.

This policy seems to have changed. It is an open secret that Jerusalem and Riyadh have begun to cautiously develop a covert, mutually beneficial relationship, especially between their respective intelligence agencies. This is not surprising, since both countries regard Iran as their most dangerous enemy. Both are determined to prevent it from realizing its goals of obtaining unfettered access to the Mediterranean and becoming a nuclear power.

Having broken its taboo regarding contacts with Israel, there are increasing signs Riyadh may have embarked on a new policy regarding meddling in Israeli elections. There is a not insubstantial level of circumstantial evidence indicating some level of Saudi involvement with the Labor party, specifically its chairman, Avi Gabbay.

Shortly after being elected Labor leader, Gabbay sidelined the party's foreign affairs and defense committee, led by Prof. Haim Assa, former premier Yitzhak Rabin's NSA and one of the most respected strategic and technology gurus in Israel's defense establishment. Despite Assa's reputation, Gabbay ignored him and the committee, and instead formed a new "foreign affairs forum" outside the party structure. He appointed Henrique Cymerman, a journalist with dual Israeli and Portuguese citizenship and a long-time associate of Yisrael Yozemet chairman Kobi Huberman, to run it.

Yisrael Yozemet (Israel Initiates) is where things get interesting. It is an NGO whose purpose is to promote links between Israel and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. It also encourages Israel to conduct negotiations with the Palestinians within the framework of the 2002 Saudi Peace Initiative.

Huberman also happens to be chairman of Yisrael Yozemet Ltd., a commercial company active in promoting commercial ties between the Arab world and Israel. Several members of the boards of both the company and the NGO have their own UK-registered companies that are involved in a variety of commercial enterprises with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Israeli security agencies have long been aware of Huberman's ties to the Saudis. A highly respected former IDF general declined an offer to lead one of the new parties formed when the early elections were announced after he realized the extent of Huberman's involvement in it. The general suspected that the party would be funded with Saudi money.

Several weeks ago, Cymerman announced his intention to run in the Labor primaries. Gabbay made it clear he strongly supported him, and it is widely believed that he is one of the candidates for the three spots on the list Gabbay can nominate if he does not gain a high place in the primaries.

Gabbay and Cymerman recently held a joint event at which Labor's foreign affairs platform was presented. They were the two speakers. This was, at least so far, the only Labor campaign event dedicated to foreign policy. Common sense would seem to dictate that this event be highlighted for maximum publicity, as Labor desperately needs to convince the public it actually has a coherent foreign and defense policy. In reality, however, it was a low key event attended by party activists, and there was no media presence.

From what Gabbay and Cymerman said, it was clear that Labor's foreign policy platform is a carbon copy of Yisrael Yozemet's plan for Israel to immediately enter negotiations based on the Saudi Initiative. To burnish his credentials as a serious foreign affairs player, Cymerman detailed how he had been instrumental in helping Gabbay develop a relationship with the Saudi leadership, and described how he had accompanied him on several secret trips to the Gulf region.

Subsequently, in a conversation with a former senior Israeli journalist, Cymerman confirmed that all his links with Saudi Arabia originated in his long-term relationship with Huberman, who was also present on Gabbay's trips to Saudi Arabia.

Additional evidence possibly indicating Saudi involvement in Labor, and its willingness to invest in it, can be gleaned from the way Labor has organized its campaign budget.

Under the Israeli system, established parties are eligible for state loans to fund their campaigns based on the number of Knesset seats they currently have. The catch is that if they end up with fewer seats in the new parliament, they have to return the difference to the state. Gabbay decided Labor would take a loan based on the 24 seats the party currently has, despite the fact that according to every poll that has been taken over the past several months, he will be lucky if Labor gets 10 seats in the next Knesset (most polls have Labor winning 6-8 seats). This means that unless the polls have got it totally wrong, Labor will end the elections with a huge deficit that, combined with its expected transformation into a small niche party, could cause it to implode.

This leads to an inescapable question. How can a man who has presented himself as a competent and successful CEO of a major corporation risk burying his party under a mountain of debt? One possible answer is that he knows Saudi money will be available.

The bottom line is that there seems to be a preponderance of evidence, equally circumstantial and compelling, leading to a not improbable conclusion that the Saudis regard Labor as a strategic asset. They appear to have already invested in it politically, and may be willing to invest in it financially as well.

The more fundamental questions are why the Saudis would change their longstanding policy of assiduously avoiding interfering in Israeli elections, and why they would choose Labor, which on the surface seems like backing a loser.

The latter question is easier to answer. Anyone who has ever had any business dealings with the Arab world knows it values age, wisdom, and experience over youth. The Saudis see Labor as an old and venerable institution and therefore as a still potentially valuable strategic asset, despite its current state of disrepair. They are therefore willing to invest what amounts to peanuts for them in the party.

The former requires a more complex answer. The Saudis have a well-earned reputation for hedging their bets. They know their position in Washington is precarious. If, in 2020, they find themselves having to deal with a Democratic White House and Congress, it could be a train wreck for them.

They understand that any Likud government would face major problems of its own in such an environment, and would be hard-pressed to maintain its influence in Washington, let alone help the Saudis. The most promising solution to this problem would be for the Saudis to develop a relationship with an internationally respected Israeli political entity that would enjoy a reasonably good working relationship with a White House and Congress dominated by the Democrats. Labor is the Israeli party that best meets those criteria; hence its attractiveness to the Saudis as a potentially valuable strategic asset.

The House of Saud has two main objectives: its survival, and containing Iran. Despite its huge defense budget, its performance in Yemen has highlighted just how lamentable its military capabilities are. It knows the only potential regional ally capable of defeating Iran is Israel. It also knows that robust support, or at the very least tacit acquiescence from Washington, is vital for any such Israeli-Saudi alliance to achieve its strategic goal of effectively containing Iran.

Labor meets all the Saudis' criteria. Despite having fallen on hard times, the party is still internationally respected. The party of Peres, Rabin, and Barak is still a prime strategic asset in a blue-tinged Washington, irrespective of its current electoral weakness.

The Saudis must know Labor will not win the elections. Given the current polls, they will be pleased if it ends up winning 8-9 seats, which would keep it alive. It is clear that irrespective of who wins, given the current balance of power and Netanyahu's legal problems, Israelis will likely find themselves at the polling stations again within 18 months or so. By that time the result of the 2020 US election will be known. If, as seems likely, Washington emerges in 2020 under Democratic control, the Saudis – through their negligible (for them) investment in Labor – would have a valuable strategic asset.

MBS knows full well that if, under his watch, Riyadh successfully brokers a peace treaty based on the Saudi Initiative, the Democrats will rush to embrace him, and not even a dozen more Khashoggis would change that. The best chance of that happening is if Israel has a Labor-led government. Considering what it has to gain, providing the funds needed to cover Labor's expected campaign deficit and recharging its bank balance is a bargain, and the Saudis know a bargain when they see one.

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