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The enemy of my enemy. GCC and Israel: latent balancing vis-à-vis Iran

Israel is going to open an official diplomatic mission in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The mission will be accredited to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), an intergovernmental organization aimed to promote renewable energies, based in Abu Dhabi since 2009. Gulf Cooperation Council's countries (GCC) haven't formal diplomatic relations with Israel: only Egypt and Jordan host Israeli embassies in the Arab region.

This uncommon decision will not change official balances of power within the Middle East: the normalization of GCC members' relations with Israel remains out of discussion, as rapidly underlined by involved actors. However, such a choice is the most visible signal of a subtle, but rising trend: the convergence of threat perceptions and geopolitical interests between the GCC region and Israel.

On June 2015, the Washington-based think tank Council of Foreign Relations hosted a conference where two interesting speakers unusually shared the panel: the Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Anwar Eshki of Saudi Arabia and the Amb. Dore Gold of Israel. In that setting, they decided to go public about their recurrent political talks, always with a central topic: Iran.

After the nuclear deal, Iran lies at the top of GCC and Israel shared security concerns. However, their “threat perception” generates different strategic implications: Israel directly fears Iranian nuclear capabilities, while the Gulf monarchies are mainly worried by rising Teheran’s political and economic leverage in the Islamic world, which challenges the Saudi one.

Beyond divergences and mistrust, Israel and the GCC region are latently balancing Iran, since it is the most pressing issue of concern between them, even if not the only one.

Israel and the couple Saudi Arabia-Abu Dhabi (which is now driving GCC’s choices and the Arab League too) want to contain the Muslim Brotherhood’s political message: they support Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi’s presidency, through diplomatic relations and the strategic use of rent. Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet sided with Riyadh regarding the Saudi-led military intervention against Shia militias in Yemen, considered as Iranian proxies.

The new Saudi outreach politics towards HAMAS pursues two objectives positive for Israel too: to undermine the Iranian influence on Hamas and prevent “IS” offshoots in Gaza to gain momentum. On Syria, Riyadh’s strategy can instead produce insecurity for the Israeli state, since the removal of the Assad regime could furtherly destabilize the Golan Heights, so opening another arc of crisis for it.

Israel and the GCC region are also deeply dissatisfied with president Barack Obama’s foreign policy, with particular regard to the second term: he fostered the so-called Arab Springs - eventually abandoning the ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt - then he pushed for the *détente* with Teheran.

The Bahraini king, Hamad Bin Issa Al-Khalifa, has celebrated for the first time the Hanukkah Jewish festivity at Manama’s palace. The mood between the GCC region and Israel seems to improve also at a popular level: according to a telephone survey by the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, 53% of Saudis considers Iran the main adversary, while 22% answers “IS” and only 18% says Israel.