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Haram al-Sharif:
Israel's Alignment with the Sunni Arab States in Practice
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In recent years, it has become part of conventional wisdom in Israel that there are unprecedented opportunities for regional security cooperation between Israel and the conservative Sunni Arab regimes: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. With respect to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, however, these new opportunities have meant different things to different people in Israel. Some see it as providing a greater incentive and opportunity to resolve the conflict; others see it as a tacit acceptance of the status quo. The recent crisis triggered by the killing of two Israeli policemen outside of Jerusalem's *Haram al-Sharif* (Temple Mount) compound and resulting installation of new Israeli security controls demonstrates both the power and limits of Israel's evolving ties with the conservative Sunni Arab regimes.

Israel and the Sunni Arab Regimes

Since the 2014 Gaza War (Operation "Protective Edge" in the Israeli lexicon), current and former Israeli politicians and defense officials have repeatedly emphasized the possibility of wide-ranging regional security cooperation with the Sunni Arab regimes. In September 2014, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the U.N. General Assembly, "After decades of seeing Israel as their enemy, leading states in the Arab world increasingly recognize that together, we and they face many of the same dangers, and principally, this means a nuclear-armed Iran and militant Islamist movements gaining ground in the Sunni world."¹

In the three years since, this perception has been turned into an article of faith that is often repeated in policy-making circles. While few challenge the point, as time passed, Israeli officials have disagreed on whether making peace with the Palestinians is in fact a *quid pro quo* that Sunni Arab regimes expect in return for

¹ ["Transcript of Benjamin Netanyahu's Address to the UN General Assembly,"](#) Ha'aretz, September 29, 2014.

cooperation. Amos Gilead, who, prior to his recent retirement, spent the last 13 years as head of the Defense Ministry's Political-Military Bureau working closely with Egypt and Jordan, declared in March 2017 that there is a lot that could be done with the Saudis and Emiratis, but that "there has to be progress on the Palestinian track."² On the other hand, Gideon Sa'ar, a senior Likud politician and former senior government minister, has argued that Israel need not "pay a price for this cooperation with fundamental concessions that harm our essential interests on the Israeli-Palestinian front." He added that cooperation with Arab regimes was "based on overlapping interests on the security level and that the Arab regimes depend on such cooperation no less than Israel does."³ Israel Katz, another senior Likud politician and the Minister of both Intelligence and Transportation in the current government, attempts to bridge the gap between these two perspectives. His "three-layered" regional security plan combines full security cooperation with Sunni Arab regimes with active economic cooperation with the Palestinians as an interim step towards peace.⁴ According to Katz, Israel's security cooperation with the Arab regimes would take place alongside progress in the Palestinian sphere, rather than making security cooperation contingent on the success or failure of peacemaking.

For their parts, Arab officials have been decidedly more reserved in their public statements about cooperating with Israel. In May 2016, former Saudi security chief Turki al-Faisal emphasized that peace was still the prerequisite for the full range of relations with the conservative Arab regimes. "If we can get that situation [the two state-solution], think of what we can do on science, on technology, on humanitarian affairs, on all the things that need to be looked at."⁵ Nevertheless, for those paying close attention, the signs of a more flexible arrangement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, short of a final peace agreement, are there. In October 2016, Salman al-Ansari, a Saudi lobbyist in Washington D.C., proposed Saudi-Israeli economic cooperation as an interim step towards normalization. He wrote that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's "Vision 2030" plan represented "golden opportunity for Israel to participate in and help bolster the Saudi economy."⁶ In a recent interview with outgoing Hamas leader Khalid Mash'al, Saudi intellectual Khalid al-Dakhil was openly critical of Hamas' position towards Israel, arguing that it stood in opposition to all of the Arab countries that support the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Dakhil also questioned Hamas' strategy of armed resistance, suggesting it has achieved little and left

² Yaakov Katz, "[Amos Gilead to JPost: Israel Has Historic Opportunity Now to Make Peace](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, March 24, 2017.

³ Gil Hoffman, "[Sa'ar: No Concessions for Regional Mideast Effort](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, February 22, 2017.

⁴ Israel Katz, "[Israel's 'Three-Layered Regional Concept'](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, March 12, 2017.

⁵ "[A Conversation on Peace in the Middle East](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), May 5, 2016.

⁶ Salman al-Ansari, "[How Israel can contribute to Saudi's vision 2030](#)," *The Hill*, October 11, 2016.

Hamas in a position where it needed the Arab countries more than they needed Hamas.⁷

Haram al-Sharif

On July 14, 2017, three Palestinian citizens of Israel from the city of Umm al-Fahm smuggled weapons into the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City and used them to kill two Israeli policemen standing outside the gates of the *Haram al-Sharif* compound. Israel responded to the incident by closing the Old City and the compound to civilians. The next day, Israel installed metal detectors at the gates to the compound, which only aggravated the situation.

Palestinian national leadership mobilized the Palestinian public, claiming the metal detectors changed the status quo at the Muslim holy site.⁸ On Friday, July 21, the unrest spread to the West Bank and resulted in the deaths of three Palestinian protesters. Later that night, a Palestinian teenager entered the home of a family in the West Bank settlement of Halamish and brutally killed three members of a large family observing the Sabbath. He claimed to be acting in defense of the al-Aqsa compound. An Israeli MK from the Joint [Arab] List, warned that "the whole Arab world will rise up as one" against Israel if it didn't remove the metal detectors.⁹

But despite the sensitivity surrounding the holy site, and its sanctity in the Muslim world the Arab world did not put the confrontation in Jerusalem over the Haram al-Sharif at the top of their agendas. The media's attention was focused elsewhere. Only in neighboring Jordan, where Palestinians are a large portion of the population, did the issue generate a strong popular reaction. As Kamel Hawwash, a Palestinian activist in Britain noted, "'We would sacrifice our lives and our blood for you Al-Aqsa,'" was a chant that was heard "in Jerusalem and Jordan, but nowhere else."¹⁰

On July 18, Saudi media publicly announced that King Salman had personally intervened to use the U.S. backchannel to pressure Israel into reopening the al-

⁷ Khalid al-Dakhil, "[About a meeting with Khaled Mash'al](#) [in Arabic]," *Elaph*, April 23, 2017.

⁸ Elior Levy, "[Fatah calls for a day of rage on Wednesday](#)," Ynetnews.com, July 18, 2017; "[Haniyeh: We call for a 'day of anger'...](#), [in Arabic]" *Hamas Media* (via YouTube), July 20, 2017.

⁹ "Arab MK: 'Arab world will rise up' if Israel doesn't remove Temple Mt. metal detectors," *Times of Israel*, July 21, 2017.

¹⁰ Kamel Hawwash, "[Al-Aqsa attack: Palestinians all but abandoned](#)," *Middle East Eye*, July 19, 2017. Even the jihadist channels on social media were relatively muted in their reaction to the crisis. In fact, the Islamic State-affiliated *al-Wafa' Media* used the occasion to criticize Hamas. On the other hand, the "Lone Mujahid" Telegram channel was inciting its audience to violence during the first week of the crisis.

Aqsa compound.¹¹ Another Saudi report indicated that Prime Minister Netanyahu had promised the Saudis (through the U.S.) that Israel would not alter the status quo at the site.¹² While the Saudis may have been communicating with Israel behind the scenes to manage the crisis, they were also carefully calibrating their statements to match public opinion. It is clear they do not want another round of large-scale Israeli-Palestinian conflict to undermine international support for what they view as the primary threats to their security: Iran and the Islamic State.

Yet widespread anger in Jordan, which began with public demonstrations on July 14 and 15 and peaked on July 21, was enough to generate a sense of urgency for Jordanian officials. While Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas was reportedly upset that King ‘Abdallah and Jordanian officials were marginalizing the Palestinian Authority leadership in their attempts to work with Israel to resolve the crisis,¹³ Jordan’s Minister of Awqaf Islamic Affairs and Holy Places, Wael ‘Arabiyyat, condemned Israel, and Jordan’s speaker of its lower house of parliament, ‘Atef al-Tarawneh, provoked ire in Israel for praising the July 14 killers of Israeli policemen as “martyrs.”¹⁴

Israel, however, was attempting to coordinate with Jordan, the Haram al-Sharif Waqf authorities (which are overseen by Jordan), and the U.S. to resolve the crisis, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia providing quiet support. Nevertheless, it took an unforeseen incident in Amman, and the subsequent diplomatic row that followed, to defuse the crisis. Following an attempted stabbing of an Israeli security guard at the Israeli embassy compound in Amman, Jordan refused to let Israel repatriate the security guard – who had killed his attacker and a bystander – to Israel, insisting that Jordanian authorities interrogate him, at the very least. Following high level diplomatic contacts, the Jordanians assented to his repatriation; Israel, for its part, announced that the metal detectors would be removed from the gates of the al-Aqsa compound and replaced with surveillance technology that would be installed over a period of six months.¹⁵ The Israeli

¹¹ [“King Salman pressured US to ensure that Israel reopens Al-Aqsa: report,”](#) *Arab News*, July 18, 2017.

¹² ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi, [“King Salman opens the gates of al-Aqsa \[in Arabic\],”](#) *Elaph*, July 18, 2017.

¹³ Daniel Siryoti, Efrat Forsher, Itsik Saban, Erez Linn, Shlomo Cesana and Lilach Shoval, [“Israel-Jordan Temple Mount security forum to exclude PA,”](#) *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2017.

¹⁴ Osama al-Sharif, [“Jordan, Israel trade barbs as tension over al-Aqsa continues,”](#) *al-Monitor*, July 20, 2017; [“Jordanian parliament glorifies Temple Mount terrorists,”](#) *Ynetnews.com*, July 16, 2017.

¹⁵ Moav Vardi, [“Using contacts with King’s advisers and a fateful cabinet meeting: that’s how the crisis with Jordan was resolved \[in Hebrew\],”](#) *Nana10*, July 25, 2017; Barak Ravid, [“Jared Kushner called at Height of Embassy Crisis With Israel and Asked Him to Help,”](#) *Ha’aretz*, July 25, 2017.

decision allows King ‘Abdullah to take credit for leaning on Israel and resolving the stand-off over the metal detectors.

The al-Aqsa crisis demonstrates both the power and limits of Israel’s shared interests with the Sunni Arab regimes on regional security issues. On the one hand, Israel has been effectively coordinating with Jordan on a range of regional security issues related to the Syrian war. On the other hand, it is not clear how, if at all, this cooperation contributed to defusing the al-Aqsa crisis.¹⁶ The Palestinian issue is not just another item on the state security agenda for Jordan. It is an extremely sensitive issue that directly impinges on the stability of the regime and King ‘Abdullah’s legitimacy with the Jordanian population, half of which has Palestinian roots.

Israel’s shared security interests with Sunni leaders vis-à-vis Iran and the Islamic State are undoubtedly valuable. They also provide a tangible incentive for those leaders to contribute to containing and defusing an Israeli-Palestinian crisis, rather than exploiting it. Instead of fanning the flames of popular opinion at home, Sunni Arab leaders, including the Saudi king, were quietly making efforts to dampen them. This stands in marked contrast to the populist grandstanding of Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.¹⁷

Yet the recent crisis also exposes the limits of the Sunni Arab leaders’ shared interests with Israel. They possess limited means to influence popular opinion among Palestinians,¹⁸ and, in order to preserve their own popular legitimacy, they are far more likely to respond to Palestinian popular opinion than to Israeli security needs, particularly during a crisis. Many of the assumptions, both Arab and Israeli, about the nature of regional security cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors are predicated on a certain measure of stability in the Palestinian sphere. The latest al-Aqsa unrest may serve as a reminder to both sides that it may not be possible to separate the Palestinian issue from regional security coordination between Israel and the Sunni Arab regimes. This may be increasingly the case if Salafi-Jihadi narratives find fertile ground among Palestinians at the expense of the Palestinian national and religious leadership.¹⁹

¹⁶ Some argue there could have been far more direct Israeli coordination with Jordan and Egypt during the crisis. See: Nervana Mahmoud, [“Jerusalem and the death of hope,”](#) July 23, 2017.

¹⁷ [“Erdoğan urges internal community to act on Al-Aqsa restrictions,”](#) *Daily Sabah*, July 22, 2017.

¹⁸ Indeed, despite Israel’s decision to remove the metal detectors earlier this week, Palestinian national leadership has called for continued public demonstrations. See: Ron Ben Yishai, [“Erdogan, Haniyeh, and Abu Mazen pray for an intifada](#) [in Hebrew],” Ynetnews.com, July 26, 2017; Avi Issacharoff, [“Mobilizing militia, Abbas approves mass protests over Temple Mount,”](#) *Times of Israel*, July 26, 2017; Avi Issacharoff, [“The Temple Mount crisis – far from over, it’s really just beginning,”](#) *Times of Israel*, July 26, 2017.

¹⁹ Adnan Abu Amer, [“Will IS find a popular base in Palestine?”](#) *al-Monitor*, March 20, 2017; Adnan Abu Amer, [“Jihadi Salafis’—A new component in the Palestinian political context,”](#) *Palestine-Israel Journal (PIJ)* Vol.20 No.4 & Vol.21 No.1, 2015; Marcel Serr, [“How dangerous is the](#)

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[Islamic State to Israel?](#)," *The National Interest*, January 2, 2017. See, also: Thomas Hegghammer and Joas Wagemakers, "[The Palestine Effect: The Role of Palestinians in the Transnational Jihadi Movement](#)," *Die Welt des Islams* 53: 3/4 (2013), 281-314.