

Iran Sees Its Rivals Uniting as Israel Talks Up Saudi Ties

By **Ladane Nasser** and **Marc Champion**

November 23, 2017, 3:10 AM EST

Updated on November 23, 2017, 7:47 AM EST

- Leadership of Trump, prince seen in Tehran as hard to predict
- Israel defense chief backs axis to prevent 'Shiite crescent'



Pedestrians pass a wall mural depicting Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, left, and Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic republic of Iran, on a street in Tehran, Iran. *Photographer: Simon Dawson*

The shock and awe unleashed by Saudi Arabia's crown prince has prompted concern in Iran, where speculation is mounting that the U.S. and Israel will unite with the kingdom to take the fight to its bitter regional rival.

"It seems that plans are being drawn trilaterally and they intend to execute them," said Kazem Jalali, a senior member of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, and a conservative. The three nations are developing "a type of shared outlook."

Like many analysts of the region, politicians and commentators in Tehran say the odds are stacked against any common front emerging that engages Iran militarily. There have been few recent signs that either Riyadh or Washington has the capacity to formulate or implement the strategic, coordinated policies that would be required to roll back Iranian influence. Still, with U.S. President Donald Trump in the White House and a more aggressive Saudi foreign policy championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, they're not ruling anything out.

As if on cue, the London-based Saudi website Elaph.com last week published an interview with Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces Gadi Eisenkot, a first for any Saudi-owned publication, in which he endorsed just such an alliance.

Intelligence Sharing

Saudi Arabia and Israel have a shared view of the need to prevent Iran from securing a “Shiite crescent” across the region, Eisenkot told the Arabic-language publication. “With President Trump there is an opportunity to build a new international coalition in the region. We need to carry out a large and inclusive strategic plan to stop the Iranian danger.”

Cooperation, Eisenkot said, could include Israel sharing intelligence with Saudi Arabia. He ruled out any immediate attack on the Hezbollah group in Lebanon, a leading Israeli opponent that’s allied to Iran. Israel Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz told Army Radio that contact between the Jewish state and “the moderate Arab world including Saudi Arabia is helping curb Iran.”

Saudi Arabia doesn’t have any official ties with Israel and has repeatedly condemned the Jewish state’s occupation of Palestinian territories.

[Read More: How Do Israel’s Tech Firms Do Business in Saudi Arabia? Very Quietly <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-02-02/how-do-israel-s-tech-firms-do-business-in-saudi-arabia-very-quietly>](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-02-02/how-do-israel-s-tech-firms-do-business-in-saudi-arabia-very-quietly)

Prince Mohammed has developed close ties with Jared Kushner, Trump’s 36-year-old son-in-law, whose shuttling between Riyadh and Tel Aviv has fueled speculation that a new alliance to take on Iran is being formed behind the scenes.

What the prince may have in mind for such a coalition is unclear. Yet there’s a wide field in which the trio might want to use their overwhelming conventional weapons superiority to push back: Israel against Hezbollah in Lebanon, the U.S. against Iranian proxies and special forces in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia in all of the above plus Yemen, said Daniel Byman, a Middle East expert and professor of security studies at Georgetown University.

“It appears there is a new scenario being drawn for Iran,” said Hossein Mousavian <<https://www.princeton.edu/sgs/faculty-staff/seyed-hossein-mousavian/>>, a former spokesman for Iran’s team of nuclear negotiators and a Middle East security analyst at Princeton University. The emerging alliance “needs to be taken seriously and it will have consequences,” he said. “We need to think of ways to improve relations” with the Saudis.

This month, the 32-year-old heir to the Saudi throne has again put the world on notice that he’s willing to take radical steps at home and abroad.

Missile Launch

Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned during a visit to meet his backers in the Saudi capital, in an [apparent attempt <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-16/saudis-spark-anger-in-beirut-s-sectarian-tinderbox>](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-16/saudis-spark-anger-in-beirut-s-sectarian-tinderbox) by the kingdom to turn Lebanese voters and the international community against Hezbollah. He [suspended the decision <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-11-22/lebanon-s-hariri-delays-resignation-as-he-vows-to-protect-nation>](https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-11-22/lebanon-s-hariri-delays-resignation-as-he-vows-to-protect-nation) on Wednesday after arriving back in Beirut. Then, after Tehran-backed Houthi rebels that the Saudi military is fighting in Yemen launched a missile at Riyadh’s airport, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir declared it an Iranian “act of war.”

“Saudi is trying to cooperate with Israel and the U.S. to have an intense propaganda campaign,” Arab affairs commentator Hassan Hanizadeh told Iran’s conservative Quds newspaper. “The aim is to prepare public opinion for a joint attack against Lebanon’s Hezbollah.”

In a sign of Iran’s desire to avoid an escalation, the influential hardline daily Kayhan was briefly shut down after it applauded the Houthi missile launch and suggested Saudi Arabia’s Gulf ally, the United Arab Emirates, could also be a target.

‘Revolutionary’ Arrests

Iran “deals with the manifestation of arrogance, meaning the U.S. and Israel, not their emissaries,” Revolutionary Guards commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari said on Thursday, according to the official Islamic Republic News Agency. “We are witnessing restraint from Iran in the face of Saudi actions because we want to avoid direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia.”

Sandwiched between the missile attack and Hariri's resignation, Saudi authorities on Nov. 5 purged some of the kingdom's [rich and powerful](https://www.bloomberg.com/view/quicktake/mohammed-bin-salman) in what was billed as an anti-corruption campaign. Toby Dodge, consulting senior fellow for the Middle East at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies, described the arrests as "revolutionary." He compared them to the nation-changing assault on dissent within Iraq's ruling party in 1979 by a young President Saddam Hussein.

A year later, Saddam invaded Iran, launching what would prove to be an eight-year war.

'Abnormal Things'

The concentration of power in one youthful, ambitious and unpredictable pair of hands is worrying now as it was then, said Dodge. The risk is less of any master strategy emerging, he said, than of destabilizing actions pursued out of frustration at difficult economic and foreign policy challenges the prince faces. Dodge expects the generals running Washington's security agencies to prevent dramatic U.S. moves, while obstacles to even a well-crafted and sustained policy would be enormous.

Foad Izadi, a conservative foreign policy analyst at the University of Tehran's Faculty of World Studies, rattled off reasons why recent Saudi actions are likely posturing.

Any attack on Iran would invite retribution against Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, much of which is within reach of Iranian missiles in the kingdom's east, he said. "Iran would turn it into dust." Saudi rulers understand they couldn't survive such a blow, Izadi said.

Similarly, Israel might want to attack Hezbollah, but it knows that thousands of missiles would rain down on Israeli towns and cities, inflicting a high price for action.

Yet, said Izadi, these are unusual times.

"We have a prince in Saudi who is doing abnormal things, detaining the prime minister of a country, arresting his own cousin and relatives and ultimately doing things that make the Americans themselves worried," he said. "The usual analysis may not apply."

