

THE ARABS

SAUDI SHIFT MARKS POWER PLAY



The House of Saud is cozying up to Israel to combat the growing threat of Tehran

By MARTIN CHULOV in the Middle East

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert sat down in Jordan last September for a secret summit with Saudi Arabia's national security director, Bandar bin Sultan.

It was a curious postscript to the recent war between the Jewish state and Hezbollah, which five months on has clearly started a thaw in one of the region's most entrenched stand-offs.

In Washington this month, long-serving Saudi ambassador Prince Turki al-Faisal made an extraordinary appearance at a conference held by US Jewish leaders to mark the appointment of a State Department official to combat anti-semitism.

Days earlier, according to Israeli officials, Saudi monarch King Abdullah had told feuding Palestinian leaders he had summonsed to Mecca that their real feud lay not with their historic foe, Israel, but with a new regional menace — Iran.

And herein lies the driver of the House of Saud's canoodling — a “my enemy's enemy is my friend” world-view that sees the Jewish state as a crucial part of a regional bulwark against a resurgent Persian empire, and is prepared to look past decades of enmity to involve Israel.

Things have come a long way from the days the Saudi regime branded Israel as the loathed “Zionist enemy that occupies Jerusalem.” And, despite the expedient motives, the Olmert Government is starting to see an open alliance with Riyadh — maybe even diplomatic ties — as a real possibility.

“They are making very unambiguous noises about Iran being the main threat,” said Eran Lerman, a former deputy chief of Israeli military intelligence.

A SHOCK FOR THE PALESTINIANS

“The Palestinians came back shocked from Mecca. The message was,

‘Forget about Israel, the threat is Iran’.”

President Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and his politburo chief, Khaled Mashaal, ended up doing a deal in Mecca, after months of murderous infighting among their followers, at the behest of the Saudis, who have since couched the initiative as a means to kick-start stagnant Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

The fact the Saudis chose Mecca for the summit wasn't by coincidence. This is about religious identity and sending a message that a good Sunni doesn't play into the hands of Shia manipulators.

Prospects of peace in the Holy Land were again cited last week as a reason for Prince Faisal's bonhomie (cheerful friendliness) with Jewish leaders.

But new friends for Israel are hard to come by in the Arab world. And, while happy with the overtures from the Saudis, the motives are clear. So, too, are the potential strategic gains.

"Saudi Arabia is a Wahabi state," said Lerman, now Middle East director of the American Jewish Committee. "They began their term as being murderously anti-Shia, and have not really moderated much ever since."

Ever since Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected 18 months ago, Riyadh has been wary of his regional ambitions. They see the hand of the Shia Persians in Iraq, and in southern Lebanon, where Iranian-trained Hezbollah guerillas took the fight to Israel last summer. And they fear the impact of a possible Shia uprising among their own Shia minority.

Theologically, the House of Saud — the keeper of the two holiest Islamic shrines — rejects the Shia interpretation of Islam. Culturally, the kingdom does not want the Iranians playing a bigger role in the Arab world. Defensively, it fears Iran's nuclear ambitions. And economically, Riyadh's massive oil revenues could be hit if oil-rich Iran moves on to a bigger stage.

The Saudi rearguard action is to align with Sunni states — and anyone else. Its overtures to Israel have been well-received by Jerusalem's most important backers, the Bush regime, which could well do with progress in at least one Middle Eastern headache — the Palestinian question — before their term in office ends next year.

SUNNI - SAUDI CORNERSTONE

The perceived threat from Iran has transformed Saudi Arabia into the cornerstone of regional Sunni hegemony of the so-called moderate states — an image that is hard to reconcile with the strict burkha-clad Saudi society. But the kingdom's strategic value makes its democratic shortcomings easier for the US to overlook. As well as helping out in the Palestinian territories, Saudi involvement could prop up the struggling pro-Western Government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and help to quell the sectarian chaos of Iraq.

The key selling point of the Mecca deal was an implicit recognition of Israel in a new administration where the reins of power are shared between Hamas and the Fatah party it democratically defeated one year ago. Hamas has stopped short of directly

acknowledging the Jewish state, with indirect recognition through agreeing to respect past peace deals — the furthest it has strayed from its hardline mandate.

Abbas and Haniyeh returned from Mecca confident they had done enough to appease the Quartet and ease the suffering of their people, many of whom have not seen a pay cheque in almost 12 months. The well-pleased Saudis waved the Palestinians off with a **\$US 1 billion** cheque that blatantly broke the international aid boycott, but which has not raised a murmur of opposition.

In the months before the deal was finally done, Abbas had said implicit recognition of Israel was the best the West could hope for at this stage. Hamas would not even table the other two demands, full recognition and a renunciation of violence.

DEAL CREATES MORE PROBLEMS

The Saudi-brokered deal appears to have created more problems for the US-Israeli alliance than answers. The summit (of Rice, Abbas and Olmert) seems to herald another dilemma — how to reject the new Palestinian Government without sending the Saudis packing.

New friendships need nurturing. And with the kingdom willing to play a role in all the four crisis points in the Middle East, Israel and the US will need to offer some significant compromises of their own. - The Australian / Feb 19, 07. By permission of News Limited

Recent Arab-Jewish contacts:

* Saudi national security adviser Bandar bin Sultan met privately with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jordan in September, said Daniel Ayalon, Israel's former ambassador to Washington. He said it was the highest-level Saudi-Israeli meeting he'd ever heard of.

* The United Arab Emirates has invited a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The conference, a 51-member umbrella group, is a strong supporter of Israel.

* Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres met the emir of Qatar in late January after taking part in a debate with Arab students there. It was the highest-level Israeli meeting with the Gulf nation since 1996, when Peres visited as prime minister.

SEVEN ARAB MINISTERS WANT RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL

Feb 22, 07. Foreign ministers of seven Arab countries issued a joint statement following a Madrid conference, expressing desire to “advance together toward recognition and normalization of relations with Israel.”

The desire was made in a joint statement issued at the end of a Spanish-Arab conference in Madrid hosted by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos.

The conference was attended by 19 members of the Arab League, including the foreign ministers of Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia.

In the statement, the officials expressed their hope that the Mecca agreement signed between rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah would lead to the establishment of a national unity government in the Palestinian Authority, "which could contribute to finding a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Moratinos said that the agreement expressed in the joint statement re-emphasized the vision expressed in the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut. He said that his country wanted to work together with the European Union in order to enable a Palestinian government to be a partner for a dialogue with the international community. - ynet news