

From the Gulf of Aqaba to the Persian Gulf: Securing Western Interests on the Arabian Peninsula

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Panel 97: *From the Gulf of Aqaba to the Persian Gulf. Securing Western Interests on the Arabian Peninsula*

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Abstract:

During large parts of the Cold War, Iran and Israel were in covert alliance. Over land, Israel and Iran had no direct link, and hostile regimes separated them. But outside the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, waters running from Israel met waters from Iran, creating a fluid connection. This paper argues that this fluid connection enabled Iranian-Israeli oil trade and motivated security collaboration between them.

The young state of Israel collaborated with Iran in several areas. Iran facilitated the escape of persecuted Iraqi Jews, and Israel provided Iran with modern technology, particularly within the field of irrigation. Israel set up a line of credit for Iran, and Iran agreed to sell oil covertly to Israel. The oil was shipped from the Persian Gulf, around the Arabian Peninsula, to the Israeli port city of Eilat. In 1957, Israel became the largest consumer of Iranian oil. From the early 1960s, the collaboration between Israel and Iran included activities in the Middle East aimed at counteracting the influence of radical Arab nationalism. They both perceived the so-called radical Arabs, under the leadership of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, as a great threat to their security and sovereignty. In 1965, an Israeli official termed the Iranian-Israeli collaboration “The war on Nasser and his schemes.”¹

Iran and Israel fought their war on Nasser by covertly engaging in civil conflicts in neighboring Arab nationalist regimes. When a radical Arab regime supported by Egypt overthrew the friendly regime in Yemen, the country became a site for Israeli-Iranian anti-Nasser activities. In addition to fitting into a general pattern of trying to hamper the spread of radical Arab nationalism, safeguarding the waterway was an important reason for these activities.

Though otherwise marginally important to either Israel, Iran or the US, Yemen, and the larger area of the Southern Arabian Peninsula, became a locus for a discussion between the three states about how to protect their common interests in the Middle East. During the course of the Yemeni Civil War, the US formally stood on the other side of the conflict. However, this paper argues that the American position merely constituted a veil. It was part of a lingering American policy to keep influence in non-aligned states as well as with allied regimes. Different, albeit overlapping, threat perceptions seem to have shaped the respective positions of the US and Iran and Israel in the southern Arabian Peninsula. The American threat perception was focused on the possible inroads of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Israel and Iran fixated on the potential unity of radical Arab nationalists in the area, and on the prospective consolidation of their armies.

¹ Suggested discussion points by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting between the Shah and the Foreign Minister, as agreed in a meeting with the Foreign Minister on 26.4.65, Doc 145, MFA 3998/9 זא, Attaché-Iran, ISA

The Arab-Israeli June War in 1967 seemed to influence the way these threat perceptions interlaced. The war led several Arab states to break diplomatic relations with the US. This was a final nail in the coffin of the already severely undermined American even-handed policy. The American attitude that emerged interlaced much more with that of Israel and Iran. It resembles the American policies we see today, where heavy pressure is placed on countries not regarded as friends, and polarization seems to be the rule.