Pompeo in Middle East to cement Israel-Gulf alliance against Iran

Jean Shaoul
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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo began a five-day visit to the Middle East in Israel before travelling on to Sudan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Pompeo met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Monday, where, according to the US State Department, the two discussed "regional security issues related to Iran's malicious influence, establishing and deepening Israel's relationships in the region, as well as cooperation in protecting the US and Israeli economies from malign investors," meaning China.

In a brief press briefing after their meeting, Netanyahu praised Washington for its unilateral sanctions regime against Iran, which he wildly accused of "targeting countries with rockets, with terrorism, with pillage and plunder and murder all over the Middle East." He also boasted that the US would continue to "ensure Israel's qualitative edge" in terms of military might in the Middle East, even as it steps up arms sales to the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms.

While Israel likes to promote itself as Washington's key ally in the region, Pompeo made it very clear who was the master in this relationship and that China's increasing trade and investment ties with Israel were unacceptable. The secretary of state allowed that the two discussed "the challenge that the Chinese Communist Party presents to the entire world."

The meeting followed the Security Council's refusal on August 14 to extend a weapons embargo against Iran when the current ban ends in October. Yesterday, the president of the Security Council dismissed the US demand to invoke the "snapback" mechanism and reimpose sanctions on Iran that were in place before the deal on Tehran's nuclear program in light of Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the treaty. These setbacks have provoked a furious US response, accusing the opposing countries of "supporting terrorists."

Pompeo also met Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi. Following the meeting, Gantz said the two countries would pursue "an uncompromising line toward Iran," which he claimed was a danger to the world, the region and Israel. He added, "We will act across diplomatic, defence and economic lines, and respond with force and determination so as to safeguard regional stability. We will not allow Iran to achieve nuclear weapons and will act on every front and by every means to prevent that."

Most controversially, Pompeo broke with the tradition for sitting secretaries of state to avoid overt partisan political activity, particularly while abroad, using Jerusalem, which plays well with the Republicans' evangelical base, as a backdrop to record a speech for the Republican National Convention.

His visit to Israel comes in the wake of the US-brokered agreement between Israel and the UAE to "normalise" relations between the two states. The purpose of the agreement is to cement an alliance between the Sunni petro-monarchies and Israel against Iran.

The normalisation of relations, which have been covert for years, is supposedly the quid pro quo for Israel halting plans to annex swathes of Palestinian land in the West Bank occupied since the June 1967 war. It thereby sidelines the fate of the Palestinians, which for decades had at least formally defined the Arab states' attitude towards the Zionist state. More crucially, it is bound up with the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime targeting Iran.

Tantamount to a state of war, these punishing sanctions are aimed at overturning Iran's government and installing a client regime that would reinforce American hegemony over the resource-rich Middle East and strengthen its position against China. Israel, as Washington's chief attack dog in the region, plays a key role in this offensive.

Complementing Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran is Israel's own policy towards Tehran, known as the "campaign between wars," involving attacks directed against Iran's allies in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq and aimed at preventing Iran from establishing an advantageous position in the event of a direct conflagration. This has included hundreds of attacks on Iranian-backed militias such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and their weapons dumps and facilities in Syria, and on Syrian regime soldiers.

Israeli politicians have begun to acknowledge quite openly that Israel is behind these attacks, transforming its so-called shadow war with Iran into a more open and direct conflict.

Since 2018 and increasingly after the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran, this

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has evolved into the "octopus doctrine," which Naphtali Bennett, later to become defence minister and now leader of the far-right opposition Yamina Party, described as going after the "head," meaning Iran. He said, "When the tentacles of the octopus strike you, do not fight only against the tentacle, but suffocate its head. Likewise with Iran."

This now involves targeting Iranian advisers and officials and their facilities directly, rather than just targeting Iranian allies, with Israeli strikes believed to have killed dozens of Iranians in Syria in recent years after having been greenlighted by the Trump administration, as well as damaging or destroying installations in Iran itself.

On Tuesday, Pompeo went to Sudan on what he said was the first official nonstop flight between the two countries. There he met Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and Sovereign Council Chairman General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan to "express support for deepening the Sudan-Israel relationship." This is a cover for discussing Washington's conditions for supporting Sudan's military-dominated transitional government. The new government was established following last April's ouster of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir, whose Muslim Brotherhood-aligned regime was backed by Turkey and Qatar, in a pre-emptive military coup that was backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Sudan wants to be removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, which is dependent on its finalising a compensation agreement for victims of the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Pompeo's visit follows a meeting between Netanyahu and al-Burhan during Netanyahu's visit to Uganda last February, which secured the opening of a new air corridor shortening Israeli flights to South America. However, Sudanese officials have sent mixed signals about the country's willingness to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel, widely seen as a necessary but unpopular condition for US support.

Pompeo was also to meet with the crown prince of Bahrain, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, in Manama, which is home to the US Sixth Fleet and its 9,300 troops and their families. While Bahrain had been identified as one of the states likely to follow the UAE's lead, the country's economic and military dependency on its neighbour Saudi Arabia makes this uncertain. Riyadh, which authored the 2002 Arab Initiative making normalisation with Israel dependent upon a Palestinian state, has refused to follow the UAE's example until Israel signs a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Pompeo is to visit the UAE, which hosts about 3,500 US military personnel at its bases. It is a major purchaser of sophisticated US military equipment, including missile defences, combat aircraft and training and intelligence systems, and supports Washington's policy toward Iran. Under discussion is the sale of Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets and other advanced weaponry to the country.

Netanyahu has opposed the sale in order to prevent any Arab state from gaining military equivalency with Israel, and Abu Dhabi cancelled a meeting with Israeli and American officials to formalise normalisation due to Netanyahu's opposition to the deal. But Pompeo dismissed his concerns with bromides about Washington's commitment to "maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge" as required by legislation passed in 2008.

Pompeo pledged to bolster the UAE's defence capabilities, saying, "We have a 20-plus year security relationship with the United Arab Emirates as well, where we have provided them with technical assistance and military assistance." He added, "We will now continue to review that process to continue to make sure that we're delivering them with the equipment that they need to secure and defend their own people from this same threat, from the Islamic Republic of Iran as well."

He will conclude the Mideast tour in Oman, strategically located on the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the region's oil must pass. Israel had maintained secret links with Oman since the 1970s, even setting up an office there after the signing of the Oslo Accords, although this was closed after Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinian intifada in 2000-05. Relations have since warmed, leading to an official visit by Netanyahu to Oman in October 2018.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior Middle East adviser, is set to follow up on Pompeo's visits.

Despite Israel's pariah status in the Arab world, relations have become increasingly close. Egypt has played a key role in maintaining Israel's 13-year-long blockade of Gaza, while Israel has bombed ISIS and other Islamist militias in the Sinai Peninsula to help Egypt and allowed Qatar to send millions of dollars every month to Gaza. Israel has supported Saudi Arabia against Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, citing Iran's "regional subversion," and steadily built covert links with Riyadh over recent years.

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