Israel Tries to Forge an anti-Iranian Coalition Yet Again

Despite Israel’s lack of success so far in its attempts to “fundamentally resolve” the issue of Iran’s nuclear program, it is actively trying to exploit its recent favorable relations with individual Arab states to bring such countries together in an anti-Iranian coalition it leads.

To this end, amid improving Israeli-Egyptian relations, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett visited Egypt for a new meeting with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi. The visit came several days after Israel and Egypt had agreed to increase the number of direct flights between the two countries with the opening of a new route between Ben Gurion Airport and Sharm, and Israeli and Egyptian security forces had agreed on a scheme that would provide an area for such open flights.

This is Bennett’s second visit to Egypt in the last six months: in September 2021 he travelled to that country, which was the first visit by an Israeli leader there in 10 years and marked a warming trend in relations between the countries. Naftali Bennett’s decision to spend the night in Sharm el-Sheikh this time was in some ways a symbol of Israel’s “confidence” in Egypt and the favorable security cooperation between the countries, which is an apparent anomaly, as nothing of the sort had happened before.

As noted by Israeli media, Israel and Egypt have strengthened their diplomatic ties in recent years. The two governments share security interests in the Gaza Strip — Egypt, like Israel, considers the leadership of the enclave composed of Hamas members a serious threat. It is therefore not surprising that during the new meeting the sides discussed “the explosive situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, which threatens a new escalation in the light of Israeli policies.” It is stressed, however, that Egypt, in coordination with Jordan, is “making efforts to prevent
a new escalation of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.” The sides also discussed the Iranian dossier and the situation in Syria.

A spokesman for the office of the Egyptian head Bassam Rada also confirmed that the Israeli and Egyptian heads of state had “discussed the most important regional and international issues, the development of a joint system of action to protect national security and strengthen the capacity of Arab states to address growing regional threats.”

It is noteworthy however that information about the start of Naftali Bennett’s visit to Egypt was not published in Israel until after he had arrived for the talks. And shortly thereafter, information emerged from the Egyptian presidential press office that the UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was coming to Egypt. This is certainly an indication that the meeting with the UAE crown prince was clearly requested by the Israeli Prime Minister and the details of such a joint contact were agreed at the very last minute with the Egyptian side.

This is clearly due to the fact that, on the one hand, Tel Aviv wants to gain support for its regional policy not only from Egypt but also from Abu Dhabi. On the other hand, however, not all of the UAE’s latest initiatives are to Israel’s liking, in particular the Emirates’ “secret plan” to normalize relations with Syrian leader Assad and to return him to the community of Arab states.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Assad has recently visited the Emirates for the first time in many years, and was well received there. This was Assad’s first foreign visit since the civil conflict had begun in 2011, not counting trips to Russia and Iran. According to The Washington Post, this means “Syria’s period of regional isolation is ending.” However, it is not only the Emirates that are “in favor of Assad’s return”, but also Egypt. In this regard, the UAE has recently been actively “probing” the possibility of a change in Israel’s attitude towards the Syrian leader, as well as further plans for the Golan. Furthermore, the Emirates want to mediate between Israel and Hizbullah, thinking in particular of some option with international forces to bury the issue of the Shebaa Farms, which is one of the pretexts for the confrontation between Hizbullah and Israel.

Nevertheless, with direct mediation from Cairo, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah Khalil el-Sisi met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed in Sharm el-Sheikh on March 22. The reason for Bennett’s astonishing decision to spend the night in Sharm el-Sheikh was thus clarified, as the UAE Crown Prince bin Zayed also arrived there.

So far there has been very limited information on the results of the trilateral meeting, indicating that the discussions between the three leaders were not open to the press and that the summit had not been planned in this format and that the arrival of bin Zayed was dictated by some important circumstances.

Official communications, in particular from the office of the Israeli Prime Minister, are therefore limited to reports that “the leaders discussed ties between the three countries against the background of recent developments in the world and the region, as well as ways to strengthen ties at all levels.” “The meeting discussed the implications of global developments, especially with regard to energy, market stability and food security, as well as exchanging views and perspectives on recent developments on a number of international and regional issues,” the Egyptian presidential spokesperson wrote on Facebook.

Nevertheless, gradually the meaning of this Israeli-initiated trilateral meeting in Egypt is becoming clearer, as are its objectives. Thus, the Israeli media no longer hides the fact that the main topic of the Tel Aviv-initiated discussions in Sharm al-Sheikh was Iran and joint opposition to it. It is for this reason that the Israeli side has initiated discussions on the threat of ballistic missile and drone attacks from Iran and other terrorist dangers in the region, including the situation that may emerge after the signing of the nuclear deal in Vienna.

As Barak Ravid of the Israeli news portal Wallanews points out, one of the most important reasons for the meeting was the US administration’s intention to create a regional security system backed by the armies of the US, Israel and moderate Sunni states. This is precisely why Israel was recently transferred to the US Central Command area, which covers the Arab states, including Egypt and the UAE. The need for Israeli cooperation with these Arab states is also dictated by the recent drone attacks on the Emirates by Iran’s Yemeni allies the Husis. Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria were also included in the “common adversaries” camp at the meeting.

Israeli Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet correspondent Itamar Eichner pointed out that Prime Minister Bennett presented his vision for a regional air defense system to Arab partners, including new laser-based air defense batteries that are being worked on in Israel. In this regard, Israel has initiated discussions on a joint air defense against Iran.

The Jerusalem Post reports that the US Department of State has already said it welcomes the March 22 trilateral
summit between the leaders of Israel, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates and the initiatives taken by Tel Aviv.

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