

ISRAEL AND THE WIKILEAKS CABLES

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It should be borne in mind throughout that the cables are not a gateway to the unchallengeable “truth” regarding regional processes. Nor do they represent the totality of possible interactions between the countries concerned, nor the highest possible level. Direct contacts between heads of state, the level at which key strategic decisions are likely to take place, will not be recorded in the reporting of U.S. diplomats back to the State Department in Washington. Still, the cables represent insight into the nature of U.S. reporting from the region, and some contain new information and evidence of real significance.

ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

Surprisingly few of the cables released so far have focused directly on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. A number of cables do, however, depict the importance Arab leaders attach to a solution of the conflict. An article by Matt Duss provides examples of cables in which Arab leaders directly related to the Israel-Palestinian conflict.^[1] Yet it is worth noting that four out of the six articles cited herein in fact discuss the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of a discussion on Iran and how to counter Iranian efforts to build its regional influence. A considerable number of cables, however, focus on the Hamas enclave in Gaza and its relations with Israel. In this regard, the cables have yielded nothing truly ground-breaking, but help cast further light on processes that had previously received little media coverage.

Among the most important revelations to have emerged from the leaks is the fact that Israel sought to coordinate its far reaching military operation in Gaza in late 2008 with both Egypt and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. In a confidential telegram sent from Tel Aviv, then Deputy U.S. Ambassador Luis Moreno noted that Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak told a visiting congressional delegation that Israel had asked both Egypt and the PA if they would be willing to take control of the Gaza Strip once Hamas was defeated. Barak noted that both had declined. PA officials denied this version of events.

An additional cable quoted Shabak (Israel's security agency) head Yuval Diskin as saying that in 2007 Fatah had asked for Israel's help in countering the growing strength of Hamas. Diskin told U.S. officials, "They are approaching a zero-sum situation, and yet they ask us to attack Hamas.... They are desperate." He also praised his organization's "very good working relationship" with Mahmoud Abbas' security services, which involves substantial intelligence sharing.

An additional revelation concerned the issue of Iranian arms supplies to the Hamas enclave in Gaza. A cable dated January 22, 2009, contains details of a request from the U.S. government to Sudan to stop flights entering their country carrying Iranian military equipment bound for Hamas.[2] It was later reported that in January, Israeli aircraft mounted a long-range bombing mission against an arms convoy in Sudan's Red Sea province. A number of additional cables reveal evidence of Egyptian fears of smuggling into Gaza and the Iranian role in this. One such cable describes then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as possessing a visceral hatred for Iran because of its attempts to "destabilize Egypt and the region." [3]

The cables indicate that at least some in Israel's security establishment did not view the prospect of a Hamas-ruled Gaza with unadulterated dread. One cable revealed details of a conversation between then-U.S. Ambassador Richard Jones and then-Military Intelligence Head Amos Yadlin. Yadlin argued that a Hamas takeover might have positive effects, since Israel would then be able to relate to Gaza as an unambiguously hostile entity. Yadlin also assumed that Israel would be able to deal successfully with a West Bank PA run by Fatah.

The cables also give some hint as to the measures Israel is taking in order to weaken the Hamas entity in Gaza. One cable noted a plan devised by Counterterrorism Bureau Chief Danny Arditi, according to which a new Palestinian intelligence monetary unit would be established to receive additional funding from the United States and the EU, while the amount of funds transferred monthly to the Gaza Strip would be downsized. Another noted Israeli intentions of keeping the Gazan economy under pressure, without ever causing its absolute collapse. The cable dealing with this issue, dated November 3, 2008 (i.e., immediately prior to Operation Cast Lead), defines the goal of the Israeli blockade as keeping the Gaza economy "at its lowest possible level without getting a humanitarian crisis." Of course, the blockade has since been substantially eased.

Additional cables point to what is apparently an accusation of corruption at the Karni Crossing into Gaza in the period prior to Hamas' seizure of power in the Strip. According to a cable published by the Norwegian *Aftenposten* newspaper, the United States had serious concerns that Israeli officials were asking U.S. distributors "special fees" at the crossing to pay in order to be permitted to take merchandise into the Strip. A cable authored by then-U.S. Ambassador to Israel Richard Jones maintained that U.S. businessmen were asked to pay more than \$3,000 to transfer merchandise into the Gaza Strip. These "special fees," according to Jones, constituted as much as 75 times the standard processing fee as quoted by Israeli government officials. According to the document, the individuals seeking the bribes were not Israeli officials, but rather were representatives of "companies working as middlemen for military and civilian officials at the terminal."

ISRAEL, IRAN, AND HIZBALLAH

A number of cables focus on Israeli policy vis-à-vis Iran, and some new details have been made

available. It has of course been widely noted that one of the most significant aspects of the Wikileaks cables was the very large amount of evidence yielded regarding the deep concerns felt by Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf Arab countries toward Iran and its regional ambitions.

Many Israeli commentators and officials have seen the cables showing regional concerns regarding Iran as offering a certain vindication of the Israeli stance on the region, which locates the Iranian threat as the central dynamic of the Middle East. Following the release of the first cables, one Israeli columnist, Sever Plocker, wrote, “If WikiLeaks didn’t exist, Israel would have had to invent it.” Plocker specifically focused on what he regarded as the gap between the public pronouncements of Arab leaders, which more often than not highlighted criticism of Israel, and the discussions revealed in the cables, in which Iran was the focal point. A headline in the *Haaretz* newspaper focusing on the same issue concluded unambiguously that “everyone hates Iran.”

This has led to various suspicions of nefarious links between the Wikileaks organization and Israel being raised in parts of the Middle East media. Such allegations have never been accompanied by any proof, and subsequent leaks have portrayed revelations that are hardly of use to Israeli public diplomacy—from the allegations of low-level corruption at the Gaza crossings, noted above, to cables depicting tough Israeli policies regarding restriction of goods into Hamas-controlled Gaza. Nevertheless, these accusations are likely to remain in circulation. Again, it is the evidence of Arab concerns over Iran that is seen by enemies of Israel as most beneficial to Israel’s cause in the information emerging from the leaks, rather than any information directly relating to Israel and its activities.

Regarding cables dealing with Israel and Hizballah, three cables focusing on Hizballah stand out. The pro-Hizballah newspaper *al-Akhbar* was one of the outlets to which Wikileaks chose to leak cables. Lebanon is currently in a state of political tension as the country awaits a possible issuing of indictments against individuals suspected of involvement in the murder of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005.

Among the cables published by *al-Akhbar* was a dispatch from the U.S. Embassy in Beirut dated March 2008. The cable depicts then-Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr apparently issuing advice or requests to Israel via the United States regarding possible future large-scale military operations against Hizballah. The writer of the cable suggests that:

Murr is trying to ascertain how long an offensive would be required to clean out Hizballah... The LAF will move to pre-position food, money, and water with these units so they can stay on their bases when Israel comes for Hizballah—discreetly, Murr added... For Murr, the LAF’s strategic objective was to survive a three week war “completely intact” and able to take over once Hizballah’s militia has been destroyed.

This cable offers additional tangible evidence of the depth of mainstream Arab opposition to Iran and its proxies in the region. These revelations are adding to tensions in Lebanon, since for Hizballah and its supporters, they indicate the depth of the enmity in which they are held by other Lebanese. Yet the cables may also assist Hizballah in its current attempts to portray its domestic opponents as allies of Israel.

An additional cable depicts a conversation in 2008 between Murr and American diplomats in Beirut, in which the Lebanese defense minister advised Israel to “avoid two things” when it came for Hizballah. In the memo, Murr said that Israel “must not touch the Blue Line or the UNSCR 1701 areas as this will keep Hizballah out of these areas,” referring to the area south of the Litani River. Second, Israel “cannot bomb bridges and infrastructure in the Christian areas.”

The Murr cables have been highlighted by *al-Akhbar*, in order to place pressure on anti-Hizballah forces in Lebanon and to depict March 14 officials as stooges of Israel and the United States. These communications constitute perhaps the most immediately explosive of the Wikileaks revelations.

The cables on Lebanon provide additional important details regarding the depth of Iranian penetration of Lebanon. A cable dated October 23, 2008, offers evidence of the presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Qods force officers in Lebanon during the 2006 war with Israel, and of Iranian misuse of the Iranian Red Crescent organization for the smuggling of weaponry bound for Hizballah into the country at that time.[4]

Regarding Iran, the cables reveal fascinating details of Israel’s preferred strategy for conducting the struggle against the Teheran regime, which is openly pledged to Israel’s destruction. An August 2007 cable, published by the *Guardian*, reports on a meeting between Mossad Chief Meir Dagan and U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns. The cable contains a list of the “five pillars” of Israel’s policy on Iran, as outlined by Dagan. These were: political measures, covert action, encouraging regime change, sanctions, and counter-proliferation. According to the report, Dagan said that these different aspects should be pushed simultaneously, with greater attention given to exploiting weak spots and ethnic tensions, which could help bring about regime change. The cable added that the covert action element would not be discussed in the larger group meeting.

This document is of importance in that it showcases a more comprehensive and sophisticated Israeli policy toward Iran than had hitherto been revealed. Rather than taking the zero-sum view that Iran’s nuclear ambitions would either be stopped militarily or that Iran would acquire a nuclear capacity, Dagan reveals the broad contours of an analysis that sees the Iranian regime as vulnerable on a number of points—both internationally and domestically—and that evidently intends to assert pressure on all of these.

An additional cable reveals U.S. suspicions that some Israeli warnings about Iran were exaggerated in terms of their timeline and were intended to goad the United States into military action. There are also some details regarding Israeli arms purchases. One cable shows Israeli concerns at the possibility of the U.S. planned sale of F-15s to Saudi Arabia. Another discusses the delivery of GBU-28 bunker-busting bombs to Israel. The cable notes that “the transfer should be handled quietly to avoid any allegations that the United States Government is helping Israel prepare for a strike against Iran.”

An important cable also sheds some light on the January, 2010 bombing of an Israeli diplomatic convoy near the Allenby Bridge in Jordan. IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Gabi Ashkenazi told UN official Michael Williams that Israeli intelligence had assessed that the attack was likely the work of Hizballah, as part of its attempt to avenge the 2008 killing of the movement’s military commander, Imad Mughniya. The prevailing opinion in the media at the time was that the attack was probably the work of Sunni Islamist extremists.

BROADER MIDDLE EAST ISSUES OF DIRECT RELEVANCE TO ISRAEL

The Arab states' concern over the nature and extent of Iran's regional ambitions was well-known prior to the release of the leaked cables. Many analysts had spoken of a Middle East "cold war" pitting Iran and its allies against a loose coalition of pro-Western regional states including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with Israel as a de facto member of this coalition. The leaked cables, however, provide new evidence of the central importance of this process in the eyes of regional leaders, their deep concern at Iranian advances, and the quite radical measures some regional leaders are prepared to consider in order to stop Iran.

The cable on this subject that has received most attention is the report sent by U.S. Special Adviser on Iraq David Satterfield on April 20, 2008. The cable is concerned with a visit by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus to Riyadh.[5] The most widely reported and explosive element of this cable was a statement by Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel Jubair in conversation with the U.S. chargé d'affaires, which recalled the Saudi king's "frequent exhortations" to the United States to "attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear program." [6] The King told the United States, to "cut off the head of the snake," according to Jubair. This call for U.S. military action was echoed by another senior Gulf figure, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Shaykh Muhammad bin Zayid, who in a March 2006 meeting with CENTCOM commander John Abizaid, urged that "action" be taken against Iran and its president that year or the following year.[7] The Crown Prince added that he was "unwilling to wait much longer." An additional recommendation for military action against Iran appears in a cable dated May 16, 2005.[8] Bahraini King Hamad also calls for military action against the Iranian nuclear program, in a cable dated November 4, 2009.[9] In a conversation with CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus, the king "forcefully" urges that the program be terminated using "whatever means necessary," adding that "the danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it."

While the exhortations to military action against Iran have for obvious reasons attracted a large amount of media attention, the perhaps more significant aspect for serious researchers is the context in which they appeared. All four of the recommendations quoted below appeared in the context of a more general expression of acute concern conveyed by the aforementioned officials regarding the Islamic Republic's ongoing campaign of regional subversion. The sheer volume of such expressions by Arab leaders in this regard, in their conversations with their U.S. interlocutors, is extremely striking, as is the variety and geographic spread of examples cited.

From Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, via Iraq, to the Gulf and Afghanistan, the statements of Arab leaders and senior officials cited in the leaked cables depict their deep concerns about Iranian interference in internal political processes and about the nature of Iran's ambitions and its regional strategy.

There is insufficient space here to provide a comprehensive picture of Arab statements in this regard, due to the sheer volume (and it is worth noting that Wikileaks has released only a fraction of the total 250,000 cables in its possession). A number of representative examples must therefore suffice.

In a conversation with U.S. Chief of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, Egyptian Intelligence Chief Umar Suleiman noted that Iran is "very active" in Egypt and that it is providing Hamas \$25 million per month. Suleiman asserts that Iran has tried to transfer payments to the Kassam Brigades in Gaza, which Egypt has prevented.

He also notes Egypt's apprehending of what he describes as a large "Hizballah cell" on its soil (the

49-man cell apprehended by the Egyptian authorities in April 2009) and reports of Iranian efforts to recruit among Sinai Bedouin. Suleiman tells Mullen that Egypt has begun a “confrontation with Hizballah and Iran.” He mentions that his service has begun to recruit agents in Syria and Iraq, and says that Egypt has sent a clear message to Iran that if it continues to interfere in Egypt, Egypt will interfere with Iran.

Saudi King Abdallah challenges then-Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki on the issue of Iran’s “interference in Arab affairs.” In particular, the Saudi king criticizes Iranian interference in Palestinian affairs and its support for Hamas. Mottaki protests that “these are Muslims.” Yet the Saudi king reiterates that the Palestinians are “Arabs,” and adds, “You as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters.”

The cables detail Arab complaints in particular of Iran’s extensive interference in Iraq, an issue that repeatedly comes up in Arab conversations with senior U.S. officials. They also quote the Saudi king’s assertion of Iranian aid to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, outline Iranian and Syrian involvement in illegal arms transfers from North Korea, and describe the extensive involvement of Revolutionary Guards personnel in shipping weapons to Hizballah during the Second Lebanon War (using the Iranian Red Crescent relief organization as a cover).

In a document dated February 22, 2010, UAE Foreign Minister Shaykh Abdallah bin Zayid al-Nahyan discussed Iran with a four-member Congressional delegation.[10] Again, a similar litany of concerns and complaints is heard. The problem, the guests are told, “goes far beyond nuclear capabilities.” The foreign minister lists areas of Iranian influence as “Afghanistan, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Eastern Province of KSA, and Africa” (specifically mentioning Nigeria specifically). Similar concerns over Iranian regional involvement are heard in cables featuring Jordanian,[11] Omani,[12] Kuwaiti,[13] and Qatari[14] officials.

CONCLUSION

The release of the Wikileaks cables is an event of profound importance. It provides a certain degree of insight both into the process of Middle East policymaking itself and into the kind of work performed by U.S. embassies in informing their governments regarding the key political events in their areas of operation.

With regard to Israel, the cables depict a situation in which Iranian regional ambitions are the key foreign policy challenge facing the country. The cables show the extent to which Iranian ambitions now overshadow smaller conflict arenas in which Israel finds itself, for example in the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and in the challenge posed by Hizballah in Lebanon. The cables also indicate the extent to which Iranian ambitions have transformed the nature of regional politics, with Israel acting together with key Arab states in efforts to frustrate Iranian ambitions.

Last, of course, the cables offer a glimpse into the very wide discrepancy between the public discourse on regional affairs to be found in the regional media and the true interests of Arab elites. By contrast, when expressed in private, Israeli positions largely resembled the public stances of Israeli governments.

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NOTES

- [1] Matt Duss, November 29, 2010, "What Do The Cables Tell Us About 'Linkage'?" *The Wonk Room*, <http://wonkroom.thinkprogress.org/2010/11/29/what-do-the-cables-tell-us-about-linkage/>.
- [2] "US Embassy Cables: Clinton Asks Sudan to Block Iranian Arms Supplies to Hamas," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/188172>.
- [3] "US Embassy Cables: Hillary Clinton Woos Prickly Egyptians," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/191130>.
- [4] "US Embassy Cables: Iran Abuses Iranian Red Crescent to Send Agents and Weapons Overseas," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/174875>.
- [5] "David Petraeus," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/david-petraeus>.
- [6] "US Embassy Cables: Saudi King Urges US Strike on Iran," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150519>.
- [7] "US Embassy Cables: Abu Dhabi Favours Action to Prevent a Nuclear Iran," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/59984>.
- [8] "US Embassy Cables: Emirati Crown Prince Broaches Invasion of Iran," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/32662>.
- [9] "US Embassy Cables: Bahrain King Says Iranian Nuclear Programme Must Be Stopped," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/232927?intcmp=239>.
- [10] "US Embassy Cables: UAE Fret over Iranian Meddling," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/249925>.
- [11] "US Embassy Cables: Jordan Wary of US Engagement with Iran," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/200230>.
- [12] "US Embassy Cables: Omani Official Wary of Iranian Expansionism," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/165127?intcmp=239>.
- [13] "US Embassy Cables: Kuwait Wary of Iranian Influence," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/219103>.
- [14] "US Embassy Cables: Qatari Prime Minister: 'Iranians Lie to Us'," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/240782?intcmp=239>.