

Israeli military chief wants closer Saudi ties as Iran tensions rise

In 'unprecedented' interview, Gen Gadi Eisenkot said moderate Arab states must collaborate to 'deal with' Tehran



Israeli tanks take part in a training session. Gadi Eisenkot, the chief of general staff of the Israel defence forces, gave the interview to Elaph. Photograph: Atef Safadi/EPA

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Israel's military chief has given an "unprecedented" interview to a Saudi newspaper underlining the ways in which the two countries could unite to counter Iran's influence in the region.

Speaking to the Saudi newspaper Elaph, Gen Gadi Eisenkot described Iran as the "biggest threat to the region" and said Israel would be prepared to share intelligence with "moderate" Arab states like Saudi Arabia in order to "deal with" Tehran.

The interview, however, is particularly striking in its very public and confrontational messaging: an appeal by Israel to Riyadh for a joint action on Tehran, delivered by Israel's most senior soldier.

It is the latest dramatic twist in weeks of turmoil in the region, which followed an unexpected purge of Saudi princes and officials by crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has also increasingly locked Saudi Arabia on a path to confrontation with Iran.

While Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have diplomatic relations, they have been edging closer recently, including a visit last year by a retired Saudi general heading a delegation seeking to encourage better relations.

Eisenkot told Elaph that the two countries agree about Iran's intentions and that Israel is increasingly "highly regarded by the moderate countries in the region". Asked about Israeli intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia, he insisted: "We are prepared to share information if it is necessary. There are many mutual interests between them [Saudi Arabia] and us."

The interview – described by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz as "unprecedented" – would have required Israeli political approval at the highest level, given the lack of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. It is significant for its intended symbolism, designed to show off a warmer relationship with Riyadh in public, not least the emerging US-backed axis against Iran.

"There's an opportunity to form a new international coalition in the region with President Trump," Eisenkot added. "We need to carry out a large, comprehensive strategic plan to stop the Iranian threat."

Last week Saudi Arabia ordered its citizens to leave Lebanon immediately, escalating a regional standoff with Iran centred on the fragile state, which it claims is being run by Tehran's proxy, Hezbollah. The move followed the unexpected resignation of Lebanon's prime minister, Saad Hariri, citing Iranian influence across the region and claiming he feared for his safety.

Tensions have also been rising over the conflict in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition is fighting against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

Echoing the recent rhetoric of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Eisenkot charged Iran with "seeking to take control of the Middle East creating a [Shia] crescent from Lebanon to Iran and then from the Gulf to the Red Sea," adding that "we must prevent this from happening".

"In this matter there is complete agreement between us and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has never been our enemy. It has not fought us nor have we fought it.

"When I was at a meeting of the [US] joint chiefs of staff in Washington and heard

what the Saudi representative had to say, I found it identical to what I think in the need to confront Iran and its expansion in the region.”

Eisenkot added that at present Israel has no intention of attacking the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon. “We have no intention of attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon leading to a war,” he told the paper. “However we will not accept a strategic threat to Israel.”

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/17/israeli-military-chief-wants-closer-saudi-ties-as-iran-tensions-rise>

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