



# PERSPECTIVES

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## A New Era in Israel-Gulf State Relations?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,148, April 22, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Many in the Gulf are beginning to grasp that their support for the Palestinians is detrimental to their own interests. In addition to practical considerations, the fact that the Palestinians have grown closer to Iran has sparked ire in many Gulf states, which see the Islamist regime as an enemy and the Palestinians' increasingly close ties with Tehran as a betrayal.

United Arab Emirates FM Anwar Gargash was recently quoted by the English-language Abu Dhabi newspaper *The National* as saying, "Many, many years ago, when there was an Arab decision not to have contact with Israel, that was a very, very wrong decision, looking back." He predicted increased contacts between Israel and Arab states and called for a "strategic shift" in Arab-Israeli relations ties that would enable "progress on the peace front" between Israel and the Palestinians.

There is no doubt that Gargash's remarks were made with the encouragement and guidance of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. In Arab states, it is not customary to make statements in support of Israel without the knowledge and approval of those in command.

This is not the first time senior Arab Gulf state officials have expressed support for Israel. Bahrain's FM has been known to take to Twitter to issue pro-Israel and anti-Iran statements.

Last fall, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu was given the royal treatment when he visited Oman together with the head of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen. In recent months, dozens of Israeli athletes have competed in sporting events in Qatar and Abu Dhabi, and Israel's national anthem has been played numerous times in Doha, the Qatari capital. Likud Party members and government ministers Yisrael Katz, Ayoub Kara, and Miri Regev have also visited the Gulf.

What has changed in the Gulf? How has support for the Palestinians been replaced by support for Israel?

It appears that the people of the Gulf are adopting a new stance as they begin to grasp that their support for the Palestinians is detrimental to their own interests. In addition to practical considerations, the fact that the Palestinians have grown closer to Iran has sparked ire in many Gulf states, which see the regime of the ayatollahs as an enemy and the Palestinians' increasingly close ties with Tehran as a betrayal.

Whatever the reasons, Israel's warming ties with the Gulf are a significant achievement that can be attributed to PM Netanyahu. The Arab Gulf states are interested in being part of the Western world and approach Israel accordingly – not out of any love for Zion, but because they understand that the path to warmer ties with the West and the US runs through Israel. They recall how America liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in the early 1990s, and are interested in maintaining those ties. It is not for nothing that there are over 10 American and British military bases operating in six Gulf States: Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.

A majority of Gulf leaders have decided to align with Donald Trump's policy on Iran, as well as his stance on the Palestinian issue, albeit not publicly. Ties with Israel are aimed at deterring the Iranians and providing a means of entry into the US. As is the case with other Arab states, genuine peace is not the object of the Gulf states' aspirations, but rather the outcome of interests, as well as the need to maintain security, stability, and US aid.

The Arab street is not interested in anything beyond an "agreement" and certainly does not advocate warm relations. Only those unfamiliar with the mentality of the region should be surprised when a Jordanian parliamentarian speaks out against Israel or when Egypt votes against Israel at the UN.

Gargash's pro-Israel remarks, then, constitute a challenge to Israeli diplomacy. Is this a change for the better? Will the relationship float freely to the surface? One hopes that this is the beginning of a new era in relations with the Gulf states, one of open and overt ties.

*This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Israel Hayom on April 3, 2019.*

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