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Israel's Budding Relationship with the GCC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Though largely motivated by mutual concerns about surging Iranian imperialism, the strengthening of Israel's relationship with the GCC monarchies could ultimately help reignite the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the Arab states have refused to grant it any form of recognition. It was not until March 1979 that Egypt breached this rejectionist wall by signing a peace treaty with the Jewish state, with Jordan following suit in 1994. The rest of the Arab world remained uniformly hostile to the idea of any warming of relations with Israel.

Recent events indicate, however, that this monolithic hostility may be on the wane. Developments over the past year suggest that there may be a future in which Arab states and Israel can engage in diplomatic and security cooperation and reduce their mutual animosity.

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, in a meeting with leaders of Jewish communities in the US in April, said in response to Hamas's year-long violent clashes along the Gaza-Israel border fence: "The Palestinians need to accept [Trump's] proposal or stop complaining." Shortly afterward, in an interview in *The Atlantic*, the Crown Prince said he acknowledges the right of the Jewish People to their own country and land.

In May, cyclist teams from Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) participated in the Giro d'Italia cycling competition, which was held in Israel. In July, an Israeli delegation participated in UNESCO's annual international conference in Bahrain. In October, Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev visited Abu Dhabi during the Grand Slam World Tour. The following day, PM Netanyahu visited Muscat, the capital city of Oman.

The day after Netanyahu's visit, Omani Minister of Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah called on GCC members to recognize Israel. On November 6, Israeli Minister of Intelligence and Transportation Yisrael Katz visited Oman to attend an international conference on transportation, and was greeted with a heavily publicized formal diplomatic greeting. In December, Israel hosted a delegation of 30 Muslim clerics from Bahrain to participate in religious discourse. Last year also saw the establishment of Dubai's first synagogue.

This is only a partial listing of the events that have unfolded between the parties over the past several years, indicating a major change in the pattern of diplomatic behavior between Israel and the GCC states.

The Israeli delegation's participation in UNESCO's annual international conference in Bahrain took place after Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa gave a speech at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in which he condemned the Arab boycott on Israel and publicly declared that Bahrain's citizens are allowed to visit Israel. Bahrain's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, tweeted that Israel has the right to protect itself after Iran's violation of the local status quo.

These statements by prominent Arab figures about Israel are nearly unprecedented.

Visits by Israeli ministers and delegations of Israeli athletes at sporting events held in Arab countries are not new. However, when Israeli judoka Sagi Muki won a gold medal at the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam, the Israeli national anthem was played on UAE soil for the first time – a significant change.

Another first occurred after the event, when the Israeli Minister for Sports and Culture was invited by her local counterpart to visit the biggest mosque in the UAE, Sheikh Zaid Mosque. This was an extraordinary gesture, as previous visits by Israelis were kept as short and confidential as possible.

Another example was the visit in October by Netanyahu and the director of the Mossad to Muscat and their meeting with Sultan Qaboos. The last time an Israeli premier publicly met with a leader of an Arab country that does not maintain formal ties with Israel was in April 1994, when Yitzhak Rabin met with Qaboos. Netanyahu's visit was lauded by Saudi Arabia, Oman's highly influential neighbor. Riyadh's role in coordinating the visit lent it historical significance.

The rapprochement developing between Israel and the GCC states has prompted a rare unity between Hamas and Fatah, with both making official

statements rejecting any sort of rapprochement until their demands from the international community and Israel are fully met.

The refusal of some GCC leaders to allow the state of Israeli-Palestinian relations to dictate when relations with Israel should move forward is first and foremost a corollary of Iran's rising security threat to the GCC (and, of course, to Israel). Still, both the Palestinians and the Israelis may eventually benefit from this rapidly warming relationship.

Netanyahu's visit to Oman took place several days after a visit to the sultanate by PA president Mahmoud Abbas. The emirate thus appears well positioned to coordinate and mediate negotiations between the two.

Concern over the Iranian threat has been a core element of relations between Israel and the GCC for many years; indeed, it was discussed by Qaboos and Rabin when they met in 1994. Iran is now even more aggressively offensive vis-à-vis Israel, the US, and neighboring Arab states, as can be seen in its engagements in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen via paramilitary militias. To face this challenge and defend themselves, Iran's neighbors seek to cooperate more closely.

Cooperation among the US, Israel, and the GCC monarchies against Tehran's actions includes several elements: condemning Iran in the international arena and institutions, intelligence sharing, tracking economic activity, and coordinating other confidential security aspects. Israel's activities in Syria, which aim to prevent Iranian power from seeping into the vacuum in the war-ravaged country, contribute to that cooperation, as all parties have an interest in preventing Tehran from consolidating its power in Syria.

It is important to recall that even if GCC leaders are positive about improving ties with Israel and have decided the Palestinian problem is no longer a roadblock, their local populations still feel animosity toward Israel. Public opinion is not yet interested in changing the relationship.

One indicator of that resistance to change can be seen in an informal survey conducted by the Israel Foreign Ministry, which showed that public opinion in the Arab world was more hostile toward Israel during the last cycle of military escalation in Gaza than in similar previous conflagrations.

It seems that without any progress (or even a semblance of progress) in the dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians, the GCC states and Israel will be unable to establish official ties. The international community should assist the GCC and Israel in expanding their cooperation in the struggle against Iranian

imperialism, and then use the budding relationship to help the Palestinians and Israelis find a way to live together.

The most recent development in the Israel-GCC interface was the economic summit that took place on June 25-26 in Manama, the capital of Bahrain. The summit's main object was to launch the economic aspect of President Trump's "Deal of the Century," and its location was chosen with care so as to send the message that the cooperation among the US, the Gulf states, and Israel is strong, and that the sides are all working toward closer collaboration.

The summit could only take place after the granting of Saudi approval, as the kingdom is Bahrain's most important patron. The summit signaled to the Palestinians that assistance greater than that received from Iran and/or Qatar will only be given to them if they adopt the peace plan. Riyadh wants to be seen, both internally and externally, as a power that is working for the benefit of its Sunni Palestinian brethren and in opposition to Shiite Iran and the Qataris, who have been transferring large amounts of money to the Gaza Strip on a monthly basis for the past year.

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