



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Iranian Nuclear Program as a Catalyst for the Israel-UAE Peace Agreement

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,700, August 19, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many factors contributed to the peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, but it appears that the primary contributor was Israel's steadfast stand against Iran's nuclear program and its military expansion in the region.

Following the Khomeini revolution in 1979, nuclear weapons development became Iran's flagship project. This effort was initially intended to create a balance of terror vis-à-vis the Iraqi nuclear weapons project, but even after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime (2003), Tehran continued to develop nuclear weapons as a means to realize its imperialist ambitions in the Middle East and beyond.

Since its inception, the ayatollahs' regime has dubbed the US and Israel—both of which had close ties to the regime of the deposed Shah—as “Great Satan” and “Little Satan.” With the exception of the Obama administration, Washington and Jerusalem have long cooperated in the effort to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions and imperialist designs on the region.

The Arab Gulf states, for their part, are anxious about the Islamist regime in Tehran, which has tried repeatedly to undermine their regimes and which covets their vast oil and gas fields. On May 12, 2019, for example, four merchant ships were sabotaged when they docked in the territorial waters of the UAE. Though Iran refrained from taking responsibility, the incident received widespread coverage in the Iranian media, which made the claim that seven to 10 tankers, including Saudi-owned ships, were severely damaged in the attack. About a month later, two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman.

Then, on September 14, Saudi oilfields were attacked by UAVs and cruise missiles, an assault that Riyadh says caused a 50% drop in its oil production and that rattled the global energy market. Though Tehran's proxy Houthi militia claimed responsibility for the attack, Western sources believe it was carried out from Iranian territory. Another source of concern is Iran's attempts to seize control of the Persian Gulf, which bring it into direct conflict with the US.

These events are somewhat reminiscent of the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990 after it accused the emirate of stealing oil from fields in southern Iraq. And while the Iraqi army was expelled from Kuwait in early 1991 by a US-led international coalition, there is little doubt that had Iraq's nuclear weapons program come to fruition by that time, history would have been quite different. Similarly, there is no doubt that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Islamist regime in Tehran would have far-reaching consequences in the Middle East and beyond.

Yet it was not just the Iranian nuclear threat that led the UAE to a peace agreement with Israel. Though the emirate's army is considered the fourth most powerful force in the region, both in terms of its warfare doctrine—which it acquired in the US, Britain, and France—and the weaponry at its disposal, the UAE (and the rest of the Gulf monarchies) consider Israel a military and technological regional power whose help and support should be sought.

For Israel, the agreement is a breakthrough of great strategic importance that also contains enormous economic potential. It may also lead quite soon to open peace with Oman and Bahrain as well. For the Trump administration, which brokered the agreement, it counts as a historic foreign policy achievement, which is of particular value in an election year. It also fits Washington's policy of positioning Israel as a stabilizing strategic factor in the Middle East.

There is no question that the agreement is a serious blow to the regime in Tehran. It is the latest in a series of setbacks—from economic collapse due to US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic through the mysterious explosions at strategic facilities in Iranian territory to the massive explosion at Beirut Port, which might entail far-reaching adverse consequences for its Hezbollah proxy.

Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek, a BESA Center Research Associate, is an expert in the field of nuclear physics and technology who served as a senior analyst in the Israeli intelligence community.