



In the Wake of the Israel-UAE Deal, Whither the Arab and Muslim World?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An agreement between Israel and the UAE to establish diplomatic relations, a Saudi-Pakistani spat over Kashmir, feuds among the Gulf States, and strife between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates drive nails into the notion that the component countries in the Arab and Muslim world share common geopolitical interests on the basis of ethnicity or religion and wish to embrace one another in solidarity.

The UAE-Israel agreement weakens the Palestinians' efforts to create a state of their own, but their criticism of the UAE's move to become the third Arab country after Egypt and Jordan to officially recognize the Jewish state is based on a moral rather than a legal claim.

The UAE and Israel see their relations with the US and the perceived threat from Iran as bigger fish to fry.

Both countries hope an upgrading of their relations will keep the US engaged in the Middle East, particularly given that it puts pressure to follow suit on other Gulf States that have similar concerns and have engaged with Israel (if not to the UAE's degree).

The UAE and Israel further worry that a possible victory by presumptive Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the US presidential election this November could bring to office an administration more willing than President Donald Trump's to accommodate Iran.

The establishment of diplomatic relations strengthens the UAE's position as one of Washington's most important partners in the Middle East and allows Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to argue that his policy toward the Palestinians does not preclude a broader peace between the Jewish state and Arab nations.

Netanyahu is, however, concerned that his argument may resonate less with a Biden administration that could be less sympathetic toward Israel's sovereignty aspirations in parts of the West Bank—as well as with parts of the right wing in Israel, which may not feel that peace with the UAE is worth surrendering historical Jewish land.

Ironically, the price of suspending the extension of sovereignty in exchange for diplomatic relations with the UAE gets Netanyahu off the hook in the short term.

Netanyahu had pledged to apply sovereignty to parts of the West Bank on July 1, but has dragged his feet since then because the Trump administration, while endorsing the principle, opposed any tangible move on the ground. Trump feared that sovereignty would preempt his ability to claim some success for his controversial Israel-Palestinian peace plan.

Emirati officials made clear that the formal declaration of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, captured from Jordan during the 1967 War, would scupper the establishment of formal relations with Israel.

The question now is whether the UAE will put paid to that notion by opening its embassy in Jerusalem rather than Tel Aviv.

It is also unclear what the UAE, as well as Jordan and Egypt, will do if and when Israel legally incorporates West Bank lands sometime in the future.

The UAE's willingness to formally recognize Israel was the latest nail in the coffin of Arab and Muslim solidarity—an always dubious notion that has been trumped by the hardnosed interests of states and their rulers.

As Trump, Netanyahu, and UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed were putting the final touches on their coordinated statements, traditional allies Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were locked in an escalating spat over Kashmir.

India last year revoked the autonomy of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir and imposed a brutal crackdown.

Muslim countries, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the lead—as in the case of China's ruthless crackdown on Turkic Muslims—have been reluctant to jeopardize their growing economic and military ties to India, effectively hanging Pakistan out to dry.

The two Gulf states, instead of maintaining their traditional support for Pakistan, feted Indian PM Narendra Modi as developments in Kashmir unfolded.

In response, Pakistan lashed out at Saudi Arabia where it hurts. In rare public criticism of the kingdom, Pakistani FM Shah Mahmood Qureshi suggested

that Pakistan would convene an Islamic conference outside the confines of the Saudi-controlled Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) after the group rejected Islamabad's request for a meeting on Kashmir.

Targeting Saudi Arabia's leadership and quest for Muslim religious soft power, Qureishi issued his threat eight months after Pakistani PM Imran Khan, under Saudi pressure, bowed out of an Islamic summit in Kuala Lumpur convened by the kingdom's critics, including Qatar, Turkey, and Iran.

Riyadh fears that any challenge to its leadership could fuel demands that it sign over custodianship of Mecca and Medina to a pan-Islamic body.

The custodianship and Saudi Arabia's image as leader of the Muslim world is what persuaded Crown Prince Muhammad to reach out to Israel—primarily to use that as well as his embrace of dialogue with Jewish and Christian groups to bolster his tarnished image in Washington and other Western capitals.

The UAE's recognition of Israel puts Riyadh more than any other Gulf state on the spot when it comes to establishing relations with Israel, and it puts Prince Muhammad bin Zayed in the driver's seat.

That is all about interests and competition. It has little to do with Arab or Muslim solidarity.

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