



The Israel-UAE Peace Deal: A Master Stroke

by Rauf Baker

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,703, August 21, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The United Arab Emirates' decision to normalize ties with Israel has boxed hardline Arab regimes into a corner, as it exposes the emptiness of the "Palestinian cause" as a tool with which to distract and control their citizens. The Israel-UAE peace deal, unlike the Egyptian and Jordanian agreements, seems to contain the potential for a genuinely warm peace, a prospect that can ultimately benefit the entire region.

The recent Israeli-Emirati declaration that they are establishing full diplomatic relations will affect more than the two nations themselves. Its impact is likely to be felt across the entire Middle East. The reason for this is that it exposes the emptiness of the canard employed for generations by extremist Arab regimes to distract their people from their own failures: that no issues in the region can be dealt with or even acknowledged until the "Palestinian problem" is solved.

The argument was that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict takes precedence over everything, including domestic issues and the welfare of the citizens of each country. Hardline regimes touted the issue to silence voices of dissent and justify their lack of transparency and development. Arab and Muslim leaders used the Palestinian problem as a smokescreen behind which to conceal widespread corruption, especially among military regimes in Arab republics.

The balance of power has been shifting in the region for over a decade. Both Israel and the UAE have significant political, economic, and military clout relative to many other countries in the Middle East, and their rapprochement serves to expose the duplicity and corruption of hardline Arab regimes. Thanks to the Emiratis, it will now be much more difficult for such regimes to use the Palestinians as a means of distracting public attention away from domestic problems.

Not a single Arab country issued a formal statement condemning or even criticizing the declaration of normalization between Israel and the UAE—a remarkable and unprecedented response. When the Palestinians and Jordanians signed the Oslo Accords and the Wadi Arava Treaty, respectively, several Arab regimes condemned the agreements. Even Mauritania found itself subjected to harsh criticism and isolation when it announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1999.

Today, even Arab regimes that have long marketed themselves as pan-Arab, such as those in Syria and Algeria, declined to issue statements condemning the Israel-UAE peace agreement. Even Qatar, a foe of the UAE, kept silent (though Doha's radical proxies should be closely monitored). Reactions were split between those who openly welcomed the decision and those who preferred not to declare a position.

This pattern indicates the significant influence Emirati diplomacy has come to exert over many Arab capitals. Damascus, for instance, preferred to keep silent rather than anger the Emirate, which reopened its embassy in the Syrian capital in late 2018. The new Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune, too, maintains good relations with Abu Dhabi and has shown no signs of bias toward Turkey's subversive role in Libya.

As for non-Arab Islamic countries, there were no negative reactions from influential countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, or Pakistan, all of which enjoy excellent relations with the UAE. Abu Dhabi could conceivably play a mediating role for possible future overtures between those countries and Israel.

It appears that the Israeli-Emirati declaration will not be a one-off event. Similar understandings seem to be within reach between Israel and other Arab states such as Bahrain, Oman, and Morocco—all of which are non-republican states. Accordingly, it will be vital to support emerging powers such as Yemen's southern movement, non-extremist forces in Libya, and the Sovereign Council of Sudan—all states that have close relations with Abu Dhabi—so they become sufficiently stabilized to rule their countries well and ultimately consider establishing relations with Israel.

It is essential, however, not to focus on the pan-Arab aspects of any overtures toward Israel. The primary aim should be to serve national interests without necessarily implying cross-border aspirations.

Unsurprisingly, it appears that Turkey and Iran are going to do their utmost to use the Israel-UAE peace agreement to bolster their populist capital. The Islamic Republic has never hidden its antisemitic sentiments and hostility

towards GCC countries, while Erdoğan's Turkey is stoking tensions across the region. Both countries will consider the Israeli-Emirati declaration and the potential creation of similar accords between Israel and other Arab countries a direct threat to their regional ambitions, given Turkey's and Iran's alliances with extremist Islamic militants in several Arab countries. The Israel-UAE peace might worsen the isolation of Ankara and Tehran in the region, which could, in turn, push them closer together—a likely development, as their goals and positions are aligning more and more.

To many of us who grew up in the Middle East and experienced almost daily anti-Israel rhetoric in schools and streets, the Emirati-Israeli declaration is an encouraging development. It creates a genuine hope that the decades-long era of Arab regimes exploiting the Palestinian problem as a tool to control their citizens and obstruct development and freedom is finally coming to an end. The proclamation effectively states that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a matter solely of concern to those two parties. In a master stroke, it has rearranged priorities, eliminated a false pretext, and broken with a harmful past.

Rauf Baker is a journalist and researcher with expertise on Europe and the Middle East.