



DEBATE: The Israel-UAE Deal: What's Next?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: On August 13, 2020, in what President Donald Trump called a “truly historic moment,” Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) agreed to a peace agreement called the Abraham Accord. The UAE is thus the third Arab country, after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, to formally normalize relations with Israel. Security cooperation, business relations, tourism, direct flights, scientific collaboration, and many other things are expected to flourish under the deal—but the implications for the wider region are open questions.

BESA joins the debate by asking, the Israel-UAE deal: what's next?

Respondents: Lahav Harkov, Hillel Frisch, Asaf Romirowsky, Edy Cohen, Alex Joffe, Spyridon Plakoudas, James Dorsey



[Lahav Harkov](#), Diplomatic Correspondent, *The Jerusalem Post*

Two days after the big announcement of the peace deal, the UAE lifted its ban on phone calls from Israel, with Israeli FM Gabi Ashkenazi and his Emirati counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed inaugurating the newly opened line of communication. And that is not the only case of an immediate application of the terms of the deal. A team

from the Israeli foreign ministry is now in Abu Dhabi looking for a site for the future Israeli embassy; there is a new flow of Emirati investment in Israeli companies working on innovative ways to treat and test for the coronavirus; business deals are being drawn up between Israeli start-ups and companies in the UAE; and Israir is working on setting up direct flights from Tel Aviv to Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

There is also the possibility that this deal will have a domino effect and inspire other states in the region to bring their behind-the-scenes ties with Israel out into the open. Bahrain is widely considered most likely to be the next Gulf State to make this move. Oman's FM Yousuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah spoke with Ashkenazi soon after the UAE deal was signed. Earlier this year, PM Benjamin Netanyahu met with Sudanese leader Abdel Fattah Burhan, which could signal a coming breakthrough on that front as well. Though Khartoum did fire a Sudanese FM spokesman for speaking on the subject—he expressed hope that peace could be achieved based on comments made by Israeli intelligence minister Eli Cohen—it has not denied that the two governments are in contact.

There is a lot of talk about the UAE trying to buy F-35s from the US. This makes Israel uncomfortable, as Netanyahu has told Washington on multiple occasions that he opposes such deals as they would compromise Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). While this story did rain on the Israeli peace parade somewhat, it is unlikely to threaten peace or normalization with the UAE. An arms deal of that magnitude would take years to be completed, and in the meantime, open ties between Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi will have time to flourish. Plus, there are many steps along the way, in the White House and at Congress, at which such a sale could be abandoned. It remains to be seen how the F-35 story will end, and Israel is right to be wary of any threats to its QME. But that should not put a damper on the historic magnitude of this occasion.



[Hillel Frisch](#), Professor of Political Studies and Middle East Studies at Bar-Ilan University

One hundred years into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and 72 years after the declaration of Israeli statehood, it is clear that the facts on the ground—especially the creation of new cities, towns, and villages to house the Prophetic ingathering of the Jewish Diaspora in its historical homeland—is far more important than a foreign affairs event such as the initiation of diplomatic ties with the UAE. If the event is conditioned upon the annulment of an extension of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, then it is an historical mistake. If, however, the two issues are not linked, then it is of course a boon to Israel as well as to the UAE. It is one more sign that the Arab-speaking states realize that Israel is too small to harbor imperialist designs, in contrast to either Turkey or Iran, both former imperial powers that seek to restore the days of old. It is more and more understood in the Arab world that Israel is powerful, prosperous, and dynamic enough to make cooperation with Jerusalem a wise move that can be of significant mutual benefit.

The Israel-UAE agreement might have been prodded by a mutual fear of the Iranian danger, but the potential benefits to both parties go far beyond that issue. They extend into realms such as economic investment, finance, tourism, and especially know-how. The UAE stands to benefit from Israel's technological and scientific advances, and Israel stands to benefit from the UAE's status as a world-class center of international services, a vital gateway to a dynamic Far East and Southeast Asia, and a valuable source of networking opportunities. The relationship will no doubt be a model for other Sunni states to emulate in order to transform a region mired in 19th-century conflicts into a 21st-century powerhouse.



[Asaf Romirowsky](#), Executive Director of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center, and a fellow at the Middle East Forum

For years, standard operating procedure in terms of Israeli-Arab relations in general and for the Palestinians in particular has been rooted in rejectionism and anti-normalization. The PLO's goal of maintaining the Palestinian question as the essential ingredient to all Israeli-Arab relations has been eroding since 1979. The Israel-UAE deal should finally convince the Palestinians that notwithstanding their diplomatic temper tantrums, their strategy of insisting that all peace agreements

between Israel and Arab countries be conditioned on a prior agreement between the PLO and Israel has failed.

The new Israeli peace agreement with the UAE debunks many of the traditional myths, and in the process it bolsters the Israeli-Sunni Arab bloc against the belligerent Iranian Shiite crescent and its proxies. Further, it should underscore to Western observers that the threat of Iran is clearly a greater destabilizing factor than the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The Iranian threat acts as a unifier, and Israel is seen as a stabilizing force both militarily and economically.

The added economic stability stemming from Israel alters the Palestinian model for peace, which is based on the fallacious occupation narrative. Palestinian society needs more economic stability, and that is what its leaders should strive to attain—and indeed as former Palestinian PM Salam Fayyad tried to do. It is doable if the Palestinians are willing to put aside their rejectionist ideology.

Finally, with other countries like Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman looking to follow suit, Israel's appeal is only growing. It is shifting from the most hated country in the region to a desired partner. However, regardless of the new regional reality, in North America and Europe—where the Palestinian cause is thriving thanks to the BDS movement—these changes will not only fail to diminish their cause but will embolden their efforts toward greater anti-normalization via Israel-spewing hate and propaganda.



[Edy Cohen](#), researcher at the BESA Center and author of *The Holocaust in the Eyes of Mahmoud Abbas* (Hebrew)

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who was said to be preoccupied with his personal legal problems and unable to deal with state affairs, has managed to surprise the world with an exceptional political achievement: an agreement that does not require an Israeli withdrawal or concession of territory. He succeeded where others have failed, and the Emirates have become the third Arab state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

The Israel-UAE deal will establish a new era of collaboration in the Middle East, including countering Iranian influence, trade, tourism, military intelligence sharing,

medical collaboration, positioning the UAE as a diplomatic leader in the region, countering Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its Gaza Strip's extension Hamas, and opening the door for other countries to follow in the UAE's footsteps. The Gulf State of Bahrain welcomed the deal and is expected to be next to make peace with Israel. Moreover, Israel has agreed to suspend its planned application of sovereignty over parts of the West Bank.

Israelis are fed up with cold peace according to the Egyptian and Jordanian model, which has eschewed normalized relations between the peoples. Israel does not need another security agreement between governments but a warm peace between populations, a peace with genuine cultural, economic, and tourist aspects. Israelis want to visit Abu Dhabi and Dubai and hope to do so. They want a real peace, not just a cold deal between governments.

Israel's Palestinian neighbors are boiling with anger over the Israel-UAE deal. The doctrine of the PLO has always been to put pressure on the Arab states to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel until the Palestinians have reached a settlement with Israel. The Arab world is finally moving past that Palestinian dictate.



[Alex Joffe](#), senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center and a Ginsburg-Milstein Fellow at the Middle East Forum

The announcement of normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE is a stunning development. Formalizing the long-time covert relations between the two, apparently in exchange for a suspension by Israel of its plan to extend sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, brings the Israeli-Sunni alliance into the spotlight, marginalizes Iran and its Qatari and Turkish allies, and ends the primacy of the Palestinian issue.

It is also a triumph for the three principals, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, UAE FM Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and US President Donald Trump. Therein lies a problem, particularly for the conventional wisdom and its purveyors.

The agreement is a clarifying moment. It came about precisely because pressing realities such as Iran and economic development were prioritized, not the Palestinians.

It is very significant that the Palestinian issue has been cut down to size, perhaps permanently. For generations, it was used by political and religious leaders across the Arab and Muslim world to motivate and distract their populations. It is now recognized as a territorial dispute between two peoples. Future negotiations will be on that basis, with the focus on the necrotic Palestinian leadership.

Opposition to the agreement from Turkey, Qatar, and Iran is predictable but also clarifying. Iranian president Rouhani has called the agreement a “huge mistake” while Turkish president Erdoğan has threatened to close his country’s embassy in the UAE. Both will use the Palestinian issue in the traditional manner: to distract public attention away from their countries’ increasingly dire economic positions.

The reception of the plan by the US foreign policy “swamp” of experts and hangers-on has been edifying as well. With a few exceptions, experts have labeled the agreement as either no big deal, a mixed bag (good because the sovereignty issue has been shelved for the time being but bad for the Palestinians), or a flat-out catastrophe.

Some, like former US peace negotiator Martin Indyk, claim the agreement was mostly a way for Netanyahu and Trump to get out of self-made traps. Others, like Shibley Telhami, claim the agreement was motivated by the need to forestall pressure on Netanyahu from the Democratic Party in the event of a Biden administration. Aaron David Miller praised the deal but noted it was driven by political needs and the possibility of US arms sales to the Gulf.

A slew of Brookings Institution experts expressed similar opinions, while Atlantic Council experts were more divided. Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi took the view that will be most common in academia: that the agreement “makes the chance of a just, equitable and sustainable peace much, much, much harder.”

The need among experts to discredit the motives and methods of both Netanyahu and Trump is near absolute, while the privileging of the Palestinian issue remains profound. The most clarifying factor in the agreement is the manner in which experts and media strive to shape perceptions, often in direct contradiction to obvious facts and trends.

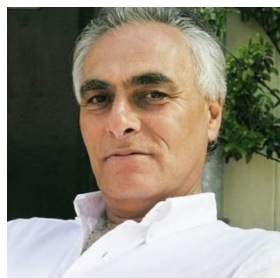


[Spyridon Plakoudas](#), Assistant Professor of Homeland Security at Rabdan Academy, UAE

The agreement between the State of Israel and the UAE is a milestone in modern diplomatic history for two reasons: its origins and its importance.

In contrast to the peace treaties between Israel and other Arab countries (e.g., Egypt), this deal was not the product of mediation by Washington after several rounds of fighting. Rather, these two close allies of the US and success stories in the Middle East (in terms of their stability, religious tolerance, and innovation) willingly agreed to overcome the taboos of the past and open a new chapter in the old Arab-Israeli dispute for the benefit of lasting peace and security. The agreement couldn't be more timely: the status quo in the Middle East is under threat by two revisionist powers (Iran and Turkey) and their proxies (from Hezbollah and Hamas to the Muslim Brotherhood).

Owing to the UAE's soft power in the GCC and the Arab world, other countries will most likely follow its lead and extend their recognition to the State of Israel. Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Morocco, and even Sudan and [Lebanon's president](#) have expressed a willingness to do so. Such a development would spell disaster for Turkey and Iran—the revisionist powers that manipulate the Palestinian question and vie for control of the Sunni and Shiite worlds, respectively—as it will reinforce their isolation in the region. That explains Ankara's virulent reaction to the deal, which may entail the withdrawal of the Turkish embassy from Abu Dhabi.



[James Dorsey](#), senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture

The UAE-Israel agreement to forge diplomatic relations increases pressure on Saudi Arabia to follow suit. President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who stage-managed the UAE-Israeli move, suggested as much shortly after the announcement by stating that "it is an inevitability that Saudi Arabia and Israel will have fully normalized relations and they will be able to do a lot of great things together."

Following in the UAE's footsteps without some resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a manner supported by the Palestinians could magnify the challenge to Saudi leadership in its geopolitical rivalry with Turkey, Iran, and Qatar as well as its quest for religious soft power in a bid to secure its position as leader of the Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia also fears that a formalization of ties to Israel without a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has Palestinian endorsement could fuel demands that the kingdom internationalize custodianship of Mecca and Medina by agreeing to administration by a pan-Islamic body.

Because of these concerns, the kingdom's ties to Israel are evolving in ways that differ from the far deeper Emirati engagement in areas such as security and technology.

Ultimately, it was the custodianship of the holy cities, Saudi Arabia's image as a leader of the Muslim world, and its tarnished reputation in the West that persuaded Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to reach out to Israel and embrace dialogue with Jewish and Christian groups as a means of bolstering his image in Washington and other Western capitals.

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