



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



**Bar-Ilan  
University**

# The Israel-UAE Peace: A Preliminary Assessment

Editor: Efraim Karsh



**Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 180**

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Cover image: The first direct El Al flight to the United Arab Emirates arrives at the international airport of Abu Dhabi on August 31, 2020. On board are US NSA Robert O'Brien, Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, and a delegation of Israeli officials headed by NSA Meir Ben-Shabbat. Photo credit: Matty Stern/US Embassy Jerusalem via Wikimedia Commons

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# The Israel-UAE Agreement's Greatest Achievement: Little Arab Protest

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: To the surprise of Iranian and Palestinian leaders, the Arab public did not protest the Israel-UAE peace agreement—but they continue to protest Iranian meddling in Iraqi and Lebanese affairs. The lack of protest against the Israel-UAE breakthrough is a sign of political maturity as Arab and Muslim populations clamor for reform at home rather than destructive ideological visions.**

Lively analysis has taken place over the possible ramifications of the Israel-UAE peace agreement. Some have rightly noted that while this is the third peace treaty Israel has signed with an Arab state, it is the first to contain the promise of a warm peace. This is in sharp contrast to Israel's relations with prior accord partners Egypt and Jordan, which are limited to very narrow personal, diplomatic, and security relations. With Egypt, the peace treaty has rarely reached even that threshold.

Hosni Mubarak, throughout his 30 years of ruling Egypt, never made an official visit to Israel, which is less than an hour's flight away. Nor has King Abdullah of Jordan. In over a decade of rule, Abdullah has abstained from visiting Israel despite meeting several times with PA head Mahmoud Abbas in nearby Ramallah.

Israel has been at peace with Egypt for nearly a half a century, but not one Egyptian soccer team has ever played against an Israeli team either in Israel or anywhere else. Not one delegation from an Egyptian university has ever visited an Israeli counterpart, let alone engaged in a joint program. Not one Egyptian cultural ensemble or group has ever visited Israel. On the rare occasions when individual Egyptian artists have come to Israel, they did so primarily to appear before Israel's Arab citizens. For that gesture they were met with opprobrium and threats. Such was the power of the Arab world's boycott against "normalization."

Many have noted that the UAE peace treaty, unlike the treaties with Egypt and Jordan, was signed under quite different conditions. There is a wide expectation that it will be followed by one or more similar pacts with other states, especially other Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. No such expectations accompanied Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.

One major accomplishment has already been achieved by the UAE-Israel agreement. It has been largely overlooked, perhaps because it is a case of what did not happen rather than what did. Even as an El Al plane flew over Saudi Arabian territory carrying a bevy of Israeli officials, businessmen, and investors to the Emirates with the aim of promoting a warm piece, there were no demonstrations of consequence in the Arab world. Amman, Beirut, Tunis, Algiers, and Rabat, where demonstrations against the Israeli "occupation," the "desecration" of al-Aqsa, and other charges against Israel are generally well-attended, were silent, at least on the street level.

There was, of course, a din of voices castigating the UAE for normalizing ties with Israel, but they emanated mostly from dinosaur institutions that dominate the landscape of the Arab world and against which there are frequent popular demonstrations. These include organizations linked with the Arab League, official professional unions, and various political movements whose common characteristic is a fossilized leadership that has been in place for 25 years or more.

Even among ordinary Palestinians, protests were miniscule. In photos taken in both the PA and Hamas-dominated Gaza, only a dozen or so demonstrators are shown burning effigies of Netanyahu, Trump, and UAE head Sheikh bin Zayed. The demonstrators were not only paltry in number but mostly members of the older generation.

Rest assured that if the lack of demonstrations went largely unnoticed by the general public, it was most assuredly noticed by state leaders in the Middle East and their violent proxy organizations. For those leaders who wisely seek to establish relations with Israel, the lack of demonstrations was reassuring, as it lowered the sense of danger emanating from the Arab street regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



For Iran and the violent proxy organizations it supports, the lesson was vivid and painful. Not only was the Palestinian card they have played for decades visibly diminished in importance, but the lack of protest over the Palestinian issue contrasted sharply with the growing level of protest in Lebanon and Iraq regarding Iranian meddling in their internal affairs to the detriment of the native populations.

Though the lack of significant protest against the unfolding relationship between Israel and the UAE might have come as a surprise, it is one more sign of long-term processes of political maturation in the Arabic-speaking public. The late senator and former Harvard professor Patrick Moynihan famously said that all politics are local. Indeed, mature democracies are usually characterized by populations that privilege local interests and welfare over universal concerns.

The Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East have been gradually heading in that direction since the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s. During the massive protests at the beginning of the present decade, observers expressed surprise at how little attention was focused on Palestinian and other regional issues and how great the public preoccupation was with solving domestic problems.

In today's Middle East, populations are no longer clamoring for pan-Arab unity, pan-Islamic unity, the caliphate, or, in the case of Iran and Turkey, imperialist aggrandizement. They want better social welfare, greater economic opportunity, good education, innovation, the rule of law, and equality before the law at home.

The unfolding relationship between Israel and the UAE fits into this frame of mind. The Arabs taking to the streets today do not believe the Palestinian nationalist vision is more deserving of their efforts and attention than their own struggle for a better future at home. In Iran, the people are less and less willing to be subservient to the regime's policy of endless conflict and dissipation of national resources at their expense.

*Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.*

# DEBATE:

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

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

**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.

*Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA Research Associate and Lecturer at the European Institute of Nice and the Democritus University of Thrace.*

# The Israel-UAE Peace Deal: A Master Stroke

by Rauf Baker

**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.*

# The Israel-UAE Agreement: Busting Myths and Sending Messages

by Prof. Eytan Gilboa

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Israeli peace agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is transforming strategic alliances in the Middle East. It formalizes the Israeli-Sunni Arab bloc against the aggressive and violent Iranian Shiite crescent that spreads from Tehran via Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and from Tehran to Yemen. The agreement sends messages to Iran, the Palestinians, the EU, and Joe Biden. It shows that the Arab states are no longer ready to sacrifice vital strategic interests for Palestinian rejectionism of peace proposals, most recently the Trump peace plan. It also busts myths about Israel and Middle Eastern politics.

The [Israel-UAE agreement](#) is extremely important. This is the third peace agreement to be signed between Israel and an Arab country. The other two were with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). The UAE agreement will increase the prospects for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Middle East.

Israel and several Gulf states have been closely collaborating under the table for a number of years, mainly on security issues. These relations are now being opened up and upgraded. More and more people across much of the Sunni Muslim Arab world no longer perceive Israel as an enemy but rather as a potential ally. This deal will increase Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state in the Middle East.

A combination of threats and opportunities made the agreement happen. The threat both countries face is Iran's quest for hegemony and domination in the Middle East via violence, terrorism, military interventions, and nuclear weapons. Iran is active in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The Arab Gulf states are especially vulnerable to the Iranian threat.

The [Israel-UAE alliance](#) is expected to deal more effectively with Iran. Other Gulf states like Bahrain and Oman are likely to sign similar agreements with Israel, as they share the same concerns that brought about the agreement with the UAE.

In addition to the matter of the common threat, opportunities exist in the fields of technology and trade. Israel, the “start-up nation,” leads the world in innovation, advanced technologies, and artificial intelligence in the fields of medicine, agriculture, solar energy, water conservation, and desalinization—all important areas for the Gulf states.

The UAE is seeking breakthroughs in these and other areas and wants to have more influence on Middle Eastern politics. It has the resources while Israel has the human power with which to promote innovation, sustainability, and entrepreneurship. The agreement will also improve the reputation and standing of both countries in the eyes of the world.

The Israel-UAE agreement halted Israel’s plan to unilaterally apply sovereignty to areas in the West Bank that the Trump peace plan had allocated to Israel. But it also sends the Palestinians four clear messages:

- The Palestinians can no longer exercise veto power on relations between Israel and Arab states with which it shares significant security and economic interests.
- Containing the Iranian threat is more important to some Arab states than the Palestinian cause.
- Time is not on the Palestinians’ side. For decades, they have rejected American proposals—including the most recent one proposed by Trump—on the assumption that eventually, Israel would be forced to accept their uncompromising demands. This premise can no longer be taken for granted.
- The agreement undermines the Palestinians’ strategy of conditioning peace agreements between Israel and Arab countries on an agreement between them and Israel.

The Israel-UAE agreement exposes the enemies of peace and stability in the region. Iran and Erdoğan's Turkey, the two big non-Arab Muslim theocracies, have not only condemned the agreement but have threatened the UAE and promised retaliation. Their purpose is to deter other Arab countries from following the UAE's example. Recently, Turkey threatened Greece over gas reserves and maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is about time the US and NATO define Turkey as a hostile power undermining Western interests in the region and act accordingly.

The agreement sends a message to the EU, especially to the Western member states that still subscribe to obsolete beliefs about the Middle East. Despite the so-called "Arab Spring" and the ongoing horrific civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, they still mistakenly refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the "Middle East Conflict" and view peace between Israel and the Palestinians as the key to stability for the entire region. Like the Palestinians, they continue to claim that Arab-Israeli peace can come only after an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The Israel-UAE agreement also busts the myth that a right-led Israeli government can't make peace with Arabs. Persistent though this myth may be, it was proven false as long ago as 1979, when the first peace agreement was negotiated by the right-led government of Israeli PM Menachem Begin and Egypt's Anwar Sadat. Similarly, a right-led Israeli government negotiated the Israel-UAE agreement.

Trump would like to have a public celebration in honor of this historic agreement like those on the White House lawn that marked the signing of the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979 and the Oslo Accords in 1993, as well as the one held on the border between Israel and Jordan to celebrate their 1994 peace agreement. The "Deal of the Century" hasn't worked out too well, but the Israel-UAE agreement is certainly cause for celebration.

Trump is hoping this breakthrough will help him win the 2020 presidential election, as up to this point he has had no significant foreign policy achievements. While this deal is indeed a major achievement, it won't significantly affect the vote. American voters are focused on the

coronavirus pandemic and the economy and are unlikely to place much importance on this agreement.

Jimmy Carter helped reach peace between Israel and Egypt in 1979 but lost the 1980 election because of bad economic conditions in the US. Similarly, George H.W. Bush got Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait but lost the next presidential election due to worsening economic conditions.

Timing could be a factor in the US role. The selection of [Kamala Harris](#) as the Democratic VP candidate is a big plus for Biden and strengthens his candidacy. The Israel-UAE agreement could somewhat offset the negative repercussions.

Israel and the Gulf states are worried to death about Biden and the Democrats because of their intention to restore the nuclear deal with Iran negotiated by Barack Obama. The Israel-UAE agreement could be a message to Biden and the Democrats that they would do well to give more weight to the interests of American allies in the region, and should certainly not legitimize an untrustworthy Iran's imperial aspirations.

*This is an expanded and revised version of an article published in the Jerusalem Post on August 14, 2020.*

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# Erdoğan's Schoolboy Response to the Israel-UAE Deal

by Burak Bekdil

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Turkey is protesting the UAE for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel—even though Ankara has had diplomatic relations with Israel for the past 71 years. If the UAE, as Ankara argues, has betrayed the “Palestinian cause” just by having diplomatic relations with Israel, then Turkey has been betraying the “Palestinian cause” since 1949.

These days, Turkey's foreign policy calculus, especially when it involves matters surrounding Israel, appears to reflect the thinking of a fifth-grade schoolboy. I don't like David anymore and you, Bassam, want to play with him. So I don't like you anymore either.

That is exactly how the 97-year-old Turkish republic behaved when Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced they are normalizing diplomatic relations. Not a word has been uttered to explain how a country that has had diplomatic relations with Israel for 71 years could logically protest another country's decision to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

Turkey [remained neutral](#) during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. At its conclusion, the then young Turkish republic became the first Muslim country to [recognize](#) the infant state of Israel on March 28, 1949.

In January 1950, Ankara [sent](#) a career diplomat, Seyfullah Esin, to Tel Aviv as the first Turkish chargé d'affaires in Israel. In 1951, Turkey [joined](#) the Western bloc of countries that protested Cairo's decision to deny Israeli ships passage through the Suez Canal. The Mossad opened a [station](#) on Turkish soil in the early 1950s. In 1954, Turkish PM Adnan Menderes, while on a visit to the US, [called on](#) Arab states to recognize Israel.

In 1958, an El Al airliner requested an emergency landing at Istanbul's Yeşilköy Airport due to mechanical problems. As it transpired, the [passengers](#) aboard were David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, and the IDF Chief of Staff, who were on a secret mission. The purpose of the visit, which was welcomed by the Turkish government, was to establish and enhance cultural and intelligence cooperation.

From 1949 until the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Turkey remained the only Muslim country to have diplomatic ties with Israel. After the Oslo Accords in 1993, Jordan joined the club of Muslim nations recognizing the Jewish state. And on August 13 of this year, the UAE agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Other Muslim-majority states are making signs that they would like to follow suit.

What's wrong with Arab nations making peace with Israel? A lot, according to [Iran](#), Hamas, and Turkey, a trio that is offended by steps toward peace in the Middle East. Among these three peace-haters, however, Turkey is unique.

The day after the historic UAE-Israel deal, Turkey's Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, [said](#): "I have given instructions to my foreign minister ... We may take a step to suspend diplomatic relations with the UAE or recall our ambassador to Abu Dhabi ... Because we side with the Palestinian people."

A statement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry [said](#): "History and the conscience of the region's peoples will not forget and never forgive this hypocritical behavior of the UAE, betraying the Palestinian cause for the sake of its narrow interests."

Hamas is in a terror war against Israel. Iran has no diplomatic relations with Israel and often promises that it will one day annihilate the Jewish state. Hamas and Iran are the "rogue" entity side of the picture. Turkey differs from them in two important ways: it is a member of NATO and a candidate to become a full member of the EU.

But even without those factors, Turkey's response is nonsensical. Ankara is protesting the UAE for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel while Turkey itself has had diplomatic relations with Israel

for the past 71 years. If, as Ankara argues, the UAE has betrayed the “Palestinian cause” by establishing diplomatic relations with Jerusalem, then Turkey has been betraying the “Palestinian cause” since 1949.

How can a sane country fault another country for establishing diplomatic ties with a state with which it has had diplomatic relations for decades? When it comes to Israel, Erdoğan’s Turkey is not sane.

Ankara does not want peace in the Middle East. Like Iran, Turkey loves to hate any peace deal in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Turkey’s leaders, like Iran’s, love to make gains in domestic politics by abusing the “plight of the Palestinians.” Ankara will likely be deeply disappointed if Israel and the Palestinians actually manage one day to shake hands over a sustainable peace treaty.

For the time being, a state sympathetic to the guiding principles of Iran and Hamas is within the NATO alliance—an odd state of affairs indeed.

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# Israel-UAE Peace Deal Challenges Iranian, Muslim Brotherhood Camps

by Yaakov Lappin

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The [peace agreement](#) between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel takes Jerusalem's cooperation with Sunni Arab states out of the shadows. A boost to regional stability, the agreement will enable expanded cooperation on defense and intelligence issues, trade, investment, and joint technological development, and could foster a positive religious-cultural dialogue. The deal is a setback for Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, two radical Islamist forces that are determined to destabilize the region and that threaten Israel and Sunni Arab countries alike**

The new [peace pact](#) between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel is a major boost to the formation of a strategic Middle Eastern alliance between Israel and moderate Sunni states. As such, it deals a serious blow to the Iran-Shiite axis and the Muslim Brotherhood. It threatens those forces' ability to control the region's dialogue about Israel's presence and about Islam, and it challenges their ability to promote a dark vision for the future.

Iran and its armed proxies—militant, well-armed Shiite militias deployed across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—have [reacted](#) vehemently against the pact, reflecting Tehran's deep concern over its implications.

The Muslim Brotherhood camp, which is led by Turkey and includes Hamas, Qatar, and hard-line Sunni political Islamists across the region, is similarly alarmed.

“The [Iranian] regime fears the emergence of a new international alliance that will have greater power to contain its hegemonic regional aspirations, and there is a new urgency to the need to prove to the Iranian people that the government's imperialist foreign policy works to their benefit,” [said](#) Doron Itzhakov, an Iran specialist from the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

Itzchakov explained that the Iranian regime's leadership is "covering its embarrassment and apprehension with a stream of defamation and threats," including a statement by Iranian Parliament Speaker Muhammad Bakr Qalibaf, who called the agreement "despicable and a betrayal of human and Islamic values," and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who warned the UAE's leaders "not to open their gates" to Israel.

Israel and several Sunni Arab states share a vision of the threat that the Iranian axis poses, a fact that has helped push the Gulf states closer to Israel.

Cities and strategic sites in Saudi Arabia have come under [missile fire](#) from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, who, like Hezbollah, are [armed by the Iranian Quds Force](#). The Houthis claimed to have fired [a cruise missile at the UAE's nuclear power plant in 2017](#) (though the UAE said no missile targeted its plant). Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been engaged in a bloody war with the Houthis, though the UAE withdrew its forces from southern Yemen last year.

Several ships docked at UAE ports were [sabotaged](#) last year in attacks widely attributed to Iranian forces, and the Islamic Republic has repeatedly threatened the Gulf states' ability to export oil in retaliation for sanctions on Iran's own oil exports.

The Gulf states clearly recognize that the threat posed by Iran's quest for hegemony is the same threat that is seeking to turn Syria into a network of missile bases that target Israeli cities. They see that the Iranian axis has already turned Lebanon into a frontline Iranian military attack post that threatens Israel with 130,000 projectiles, and is active throughout the region to subvert and threaten countries in its way. Iran has repeatedly sought to destabilize and [set up terror networks](#) in Bahrain.

This recognition of common interests led the foreign minister of the UAE, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to state in 2019 that Israel was justified in attacking Iranian targets in Syria. "Every nation has the right to defend itself when it's challenged by another nation, yes," he said, [when asked](#) about Israeli strikes.

The formation of a Middle East coalition of states that views radical Islamist actors as severe threats could mean enhanced coordination and the sharing of intelligence, as well as defense technology.

Israel is a world leader in the development and deployment of drones and cyber defense systems, while its intelligence-gathering capabilities on Iranian activities are well known throughout the region. Such assets could be shared with the UAE—a serious concern to nearby Iran. The possibility that a succession of other Gulf states, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, might eventually follow in the UAE’s footsteps also worries the Iranian regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The regime appears to be fighting a losing domestic battle to convince the Iranian population that allocating resources to attacking Israel and supporting Hezbollah and Hamas are vital national priorities. Iranian protesters have [openly questioned](#) this rationale.

The Muslim Brotherhood camp, for its part, is also vehemently opposed to the agreement because it weakens its regional position. Sunni Islamists have long accused Arab governments of seeking normalization with Israel. Rather than denying the claim, the UAE has emerged to own it in a bold maneuver that pushes back against the radical rhetoric.

Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh condemned not only the pact but also Egypt’s support for it, [describing the agreement](#) as “a violation of Arab and Islamic consensus as well as a stab in the backs of the Palestinian people.”

The UAE and Turkey are rival states, and Turkey, which has grown increasingly hostile to Israel and [hosts Hamas operatives on its soil](#), has [threatened](#) to suspend ties with the Gulf states. The UAE and other Gulf countries view Turkey as part of the Muslim Brotherhood club that rejects their moderate interpretation of Islam and their drive to create prosperity and stability in the Middle East.

Qatar, which is sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood but which also hedges its bets and maintains low-profile unofficial ties with Israel, has been involved in a two-year diplomatic crisis with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which accused Doha of supporting terrorism.

According to the Saudi-owned *Al Arabiya* news agency, Qatar has in recent days launched a [massive campaign](#) to influence Arab public opinion via media channels it funds, primarily Al Jazeera, against the landmark UAE-Israel agreement.

Ultimately, the UAE's decision to normalize ties with Israel has alarmed Islamists and put them on the defensive.

*This is an edited version of an article originally published by [The Investigative Project on Terrorism](#) on August 24, 2020.*

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

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

**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, Qureshi 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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# **The Iranian Nuclear Program as a Catalyst for the Israel-UAE Peace Agreement**

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

**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.

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# The Israel-UAE Peace Agreement Opens the Door

Dr. Edy Cohen and Dr. Frank Musmar

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It took the Arab world 41 years to produce another Sadat. The UAE's brave soldier and strongman prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan proved his diplomatic vision by striking a deal to normalize relations with Israel. Bahrain has welcomed the deal and is expected to be the next Arab state to reach a public rapprochement with Israel. Oman and Morocco are interested as well.**

The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 came after five major wars between the two states in less than three decades. The Israel-UAE normalization deal, by contrast, is between two countries that do not share borders and have never been to war with one another. This is not a peace between governments or rulers, as are Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. It is a peace between citizens. Moreover, it indicates that the Palestinian cause is of little concern to the UAE and is no longer an obstacle to peace between Israel and Arab states.

Former US president Jimmy Carter helped broker the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in a completely different set of circumstances in the Middle East. In his new book *Camp David and the Remaking of the Middle East*, Craig Daigle [says](#), "For Carter, a comprehensive peace agreement was not just the right thing to do, but he believed it would improve U.S.-Soviet relations and strengthen the U.S. position in the Arab world."

President Donald Trump has a different vision for the region. He [said](#) the deal would "lead to greater cooperation on investment, tourism, security, technology, energy, and other areas while the two countries move to allow regular direct passenger flights, open embassies, and trade ambassadors for the first time... Now that the ice has been broken, I expect more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates' lead."

For PM Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israel-UAE deal is a huge win and a validation of his “peace for peace” doctrine. With the agreement, for which he made the concession of postponing Israel’s planned application of sovereignty to parts of the West Bank, he has improved Israel’s ties with the West as well as with much of the Arab world.

The Israel-UAE deal is also a major success for President Trump’s Middle East doctrine. It has breathed new life into his “Peace to Prosperity” plan, which was engineered by his adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner. Congressman Gregory W. Meeks, the senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, [said](#), “The agreement between Israel and the UAE to officially establish diplomatic relations marks a significant milestone for the region, bolstering and promoting stability and cooperation in the Middle East.”

The Israel-UAE deal will establish a new era of collaboration in the Middle East. In addition to joint efforts to counter Iranian influence and Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, the Israel-UAE relationship will involve bilateral trade and tourism, the sharing of military intelligence, medical collaboration, and the positioning of the UAE as a diplomatic leader in the region.

At 8:03 pm on November 20, 1977, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt [stepped](#) onto Israeli soil at Ben-Gurion International Airport. The time and date will be recorded once again when Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan does the same. The Israel-UAE deal opened the door for other countries to follow in the UAE’s footsteps. Will Bahrain, Oman, or Morocco be next?

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# Iran and the Israel-UAE Deal

By Dr. Doron Itzchakov

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates presents the Iranian regime with dilemmas on both the foreign and the domestic front. The regime fears the emergence of a new international alliance that will have greater power to contain its hegemonic regional aspirations, and there is a new urgency to the need to prove to the Iranian people that the government's imperialist foreign policy works to their benefit.

The condemnations in the Iranian media of the nascent Israel-UAE peace agreement are hardly surprising. The regime's leadership is covering its embarrassment and apprehension with a stream of defamation and threats. Parliament Speaker Muhammad Bakr Qalibaf called the agreement "despicable and a betrayal of human and Islamic values," while President Rouhani warned the UAE leaders "[not to open their gates](#)" to Israel. (An interesting exception to this pattern was the statement of former MP Ali Motahari, who tweeted, "Apart from the betrayal of UAE rulers, the blame was also on us for [scaring the Arabs and pushing them into Israeli arms](#)".)

Israel's rapprochement with the Gulf state is raising concerns in Tehran for a number of reasons. First, the regime fears that an alliance comprising Israel, the Gulf States, and other countries, supported by Washington and Riyadh, would be a serious roadblock in the path of Iran's goal of regional hegemony. A multinational system of that kind would strengthen its constituent members not only on the security level but also on the economic, commercial, and cultural levels—a worrisome prospect for Tehran.

The prospect of such an alliance is particularly troubling to the regime at a time when its regional status is declining. Recent events in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have negatively affected Tehran's ability to promote its "axis of resistance" in the region. Its status in Iraq has been weakening since the October 2019 uprisings, a pattern that gathered new momentum after



the killing of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. The deep crisis now engulfing Lebanon and the Hague's conviction of a Hezbollah member for the assassination of PM Rafiq Hariri do not contribute to Iran's prestige. On top of all this, air strikes in Syria are severely hampering the regime's attempts to turn the country into a front line against Israel.

Another element of the Israel-UAE deal that is causing discomfort for the Islamist regime is the problem of how to control discourse on the subject among the Iranian general public. The leadership is finding it difficult to explain the emerging ties between Israel and Muslim countries to its citizens. It is defaulting to the traditional pattern of labeling those states traitors to Islamic values and the Palestinian cause. Both Iran and Turkey are leaning on the Palestinian issue as a propaganda tool to advance their status in the Muslim world.

This message is not getting the traction it once did among ordinary Iranians. The educated social stratum in Iran does not buy the argument that normalization with Israel is a betrayal by definition. Compounding this problem, more and more Iranians are expressing the view that the regime's investment of resources in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Gaza comes at their expense. In an indicator of this trend, the slogan "Not for Gaza, not for Lebanon, I'll sacrifice my life only for Iran" is heard more and more at Iranian protests and online.

The regime has been working since its inception in 1979 to inculcate an adversarial framework in the minds of the Iranian people, but it may have overplayed that hand. A large proportion of Iranian society has come to realize that that framework, promoted at the direction of the Supreme Leader, is intended first and foremost to ensure the survival of the Islamist regime—and the regime's interest does not coincide with the people's interest.

From the mullahs' point of view, the Israel-UAE agreement is a painful blow because it sends a message that Muslim countries not only do not view Israel as an enemy that must be destroyed but view it as a potential partner for mutual prosperity and security. The Iranian people, unlike their leadership, do not believe Egypt, Jordan, and now the UAE are traitors to Islam.

The foreign policy of the Iranian leadership is designed to strengthen extremists at the expense of the welfare and prosperity of the country's own citizens. The regime has no intention of altering this policy, and will continue to threaten other countries in the Persian Gulf that might be considering a similar rapprochement with Jerusalem. It is possible that Iran will now concentrate its efforts on harassing [oil tankers anchored in UAE ports](#).

Ever since its establishment, the Islamic regime has worked tirelessly to spread its revolutionary ideology throughout the Muslim world. This has caused tensions with countries across the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Iraq (during the reign of Saddam Hussein). This rivalry was one of the key factors leading to the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The GCC's official goal was to strengthen and stabilize the Gulf principalities by tightening their security and economic ties. They were brought together largely by their collective fear of revolutionary Iran.

According to media reports, Bahrain is likely to be one of the next Gulf States to advance its ties with Israel. There too, Iran's subversion of Bahrain served as a catalyst for the Khalifa family to establish ties with Israel.

Bahrain's demographic structure is 70% Shiite, which rendered it, in the eyes of the Iranian regime, fertile ground for the advancement of its revolutionary worldview. As early as December 1981 the "Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain" tried and failed to overthrow the ruling monarchy and establish an Iran-backed theocratic regime, and in 1996 the Bahrain authorities uncovered another attempt by Tehran to overthrow the regime and replace it with a theocracy according to the Velayat-e Faqih model. Iran accompanied these subversive activities with "soft power" measures and support for opposition organizations, and it trained militants in the emirate.

The Iranian revolutionary model has been a threatening and destabilizing factor in the Middle East for decades. The greater Iran's hostility toward the countries in the region, the greater the likelihood that they will eventually come together in some way to oppose it.

The formation of alliances among countries experiencing a common threat is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East. This was true six decades ago, when the Iranian monarchy felt threatened by the spread of Arab nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and it is true today. The expression “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” is as valid today as it ever was, despite attempts to throw that *realpolitik* model into the so-called dustbin of history.

Revolutionary ideology relies by definition on the demonization of the adversary as a means of justifying its path and values. The survival of a revolutionary regime depends, to a large extent, on its ability to sustain such thinking in the minds of its citizens. The Israel-UAE deal makes it much harder for the Iranian regime to justify an imperialist foreign policy that comes at the expense of the Iranian people.

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# Implications of the Israel-UAE Peace Deal

by Jonathan Fulton and Roie Yellinek

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** While normalization between the UAE and Israel is probably not the game-changer some believe it to be, it does firm up a changing regional environment. The deal will create a new dynamic on three levels: domestic, regional, and international. Expect more pieces to fall into place soon as other countries adjust.

The announcement that Israel and the UAE are normalizing relations is less of an [earthquake](#) than it might appear, as Israel and several Gulf states have [been moving](#) in that direction. The breakthrough appears to be the logical outcome of the trajectory followed by PM Benjamin Netanyahu and the UAE's Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zayed, who have had secret diplomatic contacts for some time. Their agreement is the third peace deal between Israel and an Arab country, following Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). It will create a new dynamic on three levels: domestic, regional, and international.

Domestically, the two states' leaders chose to describe the deal differently to reflect their different audiences. The Emiratis emphasized that the deal will postpone Israel's planned application of sovereignty to portions of the West Bank, making normalization consistent with support for the Palestinians. The Israelis used the breakthrough to shift attention away from local economic and political problems, and even as a starting point for an election campaign. Both sides agreed that the rapprochement is an historic step that can give real hope to the region.

Within the UAE public sentiment has been largely supportive, as would be expected. While an older generation of Emiratis grew up with a harsh view of Israel, the Palestinian cause has been less of a rallying cry for those who came of age in the 21st century, a time of great regional turmoil. Among younger Emiratis, a more pragmatic view of Israel seems to be the norm, especially as Iranian imperialism

and militant Islam have taken on a larger role in the regional threat perception in the post-Arab uprisings era.

Beyond the domestic level, the announcement has significant regional implications. Turkey and Iran both reacted as one would expect. Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif criticized the deal during his recent visit to Lebanon, [describing](#) it as a stab in the back for Lebanon and other Arab countries. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [threatened](#) to cut diplomatic ties with the UAE and shut its embassy over the deal. The new alignment threatens both Iran and Turkey and challenges their regional policies.

Reactions from other local governments have been more measured. Egypt, Oman, and Bahrain all [expressed support](#). Bahrain is [expected](#) to be the next Arab state to recognize Israel, and Oman has long advocated for warmer relations. In 2018, Oman's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdulla [speculated](#) that "maybe it is time for Israel to be treated the same [as other states] and also bear the same obligations." Saudi Arabia [has remained](#) quiet about its relationship with Israel, though there is speculation that the UAE deal might open the door for the Saudis to follow suit.

On the international level, responses have varied between support and indifference. One development to keep an eye on is the US-China rivalry in the Middle East. Last month's leaked details of a supposed agreement between Beijing and Tehran intensified tensions between Washington and Beijing, and the Middle East is increasingly looking like a possible theater of competition between the two superpowers. The agreement between the UAE and Israel, both US allies, could be interpreted as a counter to the Iran-China deal. However, both countries also enjoy advanced relations with China, and it is unlikely that leaders in either state would want to antagonize Beijing. Regardless, any developments that alter the Middle East's strategic landscape will have implications on the broader international level, and the responses of leaders in the US, China, and Russia will bear watching.

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# The Israel-UAE Peace Agreement Spells Trouble for Ankara and Tehran

by Dmitri Shufutinsky

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In an extraordinary breakthrough, the United Arab Emirates and Israel have agreed to establish open diplomatic relations after years of secret contacts. Other than the Palestinians, Turkey and Iran are the biggest losers from this development.**

The historic normalization agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that was revealed by President Donald Trump on August 13, 2020 is a revolutionary event in modern Middle Eastern history. While it could potentially save the increasingly endangered governments of PM Benjamin Netanyahu and President Trump, the deal has two more significant elements. First, it heralds the end of the “Palestinian cause” and its stranglehold on the prospects for Middle East peace; and second, it is probably the beginning of the end for Turkey’s and Iran’s imperial projects in the region.

With the most powerful regional military on its side, the UAE will be increasingly able to put pressure on the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen, and will be able to threaten Turkey’s designs for Libya. This is why Iran and Turkey were nearly alone in the Muslim world—indeed, in the whole international community—in their condemnation of the peace deal.

For years, the UN-EU “peace industry” ignored regional developments and continued to peddle the lie that only the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines could bring about stability in the Middle East and acceptance of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state. That is no more. The UAE joins Egypt and Jordan among the Arab countries that recognize Israel, and it did so without reference to the Palestinians. Other countries, notably [Bahrain](#), [Oman](#), [Morocco](#), and [Sudan](#), are said to be considering signing similar agreements in the coming weeks.

In light of the counterterror fight against groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis, it makes sense that Arab states such as the UAE would wish to normalize relations with the Jewish state for their own benefit and for the good of the region. However, it is likely that the main reason Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem made amends was to bring an end to the threats posed to both countries and to the rest of the Arab world by Turkey and Iran.

Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have either been destroyed or reduced to the status of colonies of their former Persian and Ottoman masters. Qatar has cozied up to both countries at the expense of its Arab neighbors. The Palestinians have made the mistake of repeatedly condemning secret ties between their Arab brethren and their Jewish enemies while cozying up to Tehran and Ankara. In reality, it was the Palestinians who abandoned their Arab brethren for foreign usurpers. The powerful Arab states have finally had enough, and are advancing their own national security interests no matter what the Palestinians may want.

In Yemen, the Islamic Republic has backed the Houthi rebellion, which regularly threatens Jews and Israel. Just as Hezbollah and Hamas shoot rockets at Israeli cities, the Houthis fire rockets at Emirati and Saudi targets. Houthis regularly threaten to fire missiles at Dubai and Abu Dhabi—important global cities for trade and economics—just as Hezbollah and Hamas threaten to raze Haifa and Tel Aviv in the next war.

It is only natural that Israel and moderate Arab regimes see the commonality in the threat they face. After all, Qatar and Iran both provide assistance to Hezbollah, and they—along with Turkey—prop up the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip. In Libya, Turkey and its Syrian mercenaries have intervened militarily to destroy Khalifa Haftar's secular rebellion, which allegedly has [contacts with Jerusalem](#) and has long sought the help of Gulf Arab states with the goal of stemming the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt has threatened to invade Libya to quell the Turkish-backed insurrection, but it is busy with a dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile



and an insurgency in Sinai as it battles an economic crisis. UN backing for the Turkish side in Libya, as well as the fact that Egypt relies on Emirati and Israeli help in Sinai, makes it unlikely that Cairo can achieve a victory on its own in Libya without paying a heavy price. This is why the Emirati-Israeli agreement is so crucial to the future of Israeli-Arab relations in the region.

Iran and its Hezbollah proxy in Lebanon have experienced major setbacks over the past few years. Hezbollah has received less cash from Iran since 2018, when the US sent Tehran into an economic crisis by reimposing sanctions after leaving the nuclear deal. Lebanon's own economic crisis—compounded by the pandemic and internal riots that are often anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah—has only grown worse, particularly as Hezbollah is suspected of being partially responsible for the Beirut Port explosion earlier this month.

Iran's mishandling of the pandemic and internal unrest, along with its and Hezbollah's battlefield losses in Syria, have weakened its imperialist drive throughout the region. Israel has reached interim agreements with Gaza while engaging in limited military activity against the Strip that keeps the ruling groups weak. Iran's loss of its chief military strategists in Iraq this past January further undermined its designs on the region, as have the growing global recognition of Hezbollah as a terror group and the sanctions that accompany that recognition. Iraqi protests against the Iranian regime and its proxies have also become more commonplace.

For now, Yemen remains the Islamic Republic's strongest hope to continue its imperialist crusade. But the UAE-Israel peace deal means that Israeli military experience, technology, and intelligence will likely make their way to Abu Dhabi to help quell and ultimately crush the Houthi rebellion. This would lead to the isolation and humiliation of the regime in Tehran while bolstering the new nationalist and secular system emerging in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama.

Turkey, too, is worried about the rapprochement between the Israelis and the Arabs—particularly the UAE. Israel has been accused of sending intelligence and some military aid to Khalifa Haftar. With a

more open relationship with Abu Dhabi, Jerusalem is likely to increase such aid to the anti-Muslim Brotherhood coalition in Libya, which can scupper Ankara's designs there.

Turkey has been [giving shelter](#) to Hamas terrorists on its soil while trying to increase Islamist sentiment about Jerusalem. Its regular incitement against Israel and territorial encroachment on Cyprus and Greece has turned Jerusalem away from its traditional Turkish partner and closer to southeastern Europe and Arab countries. Israel will take any action necessary to preserve its economic interests in the Mediterranean, which Turkey's maritime deal with the Government of National Accord in Libya seeks to destroy. France and Egypt have also entered the Mediterranean fray on the side of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

These developments had already isolated Turkey in the region. If more direct military assistance reaches Haftar from Jerusalem, Ankara will find it extremely difficult to impose its will on Libya. Qatar, too, will probably remain relatively isolated due to its close ties to Hezbollah, Iran, and Turkey. The UAE's own investment in the Israel-Egypt-Cyprus-Greece pipeline further illustrates the strategic reorientation of the region and Ankara's isolation.

Regardless of what the far left, the Palestinians, and the "peace industry" may say, the Israeli-Emirati peace deal has fundamentally reshaped the Middle East and increased the chances of long-term regional peace, as well as the acceptance and recognition of the Jewish state. Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi will work together to fight the pandemic while further sidelining Iran, Qatar, and Turkey.

The Israel-UAE rapprochement will likely spur other regional states to recognize Israel as well. Hopefully the Palestinians will grasp that their century-long rejectionism has failed and adopt a real desire for peace with their Jewish neighbor.

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# The Israel-UAE Peace Deal Highlights Morocco's Diplomatic Eclipse

by Irina Tsukerman and Anis El Okbani

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Israel-UAE peace deal was an unpleasant surprise to the Moroccan diplomatic and intelligence community as it foiled the general expectation that Rabat would be the third regional power to hold the distinction of normalizing relations with Jerusalem. Reliance on past accomplishments in relationship-building, sentimental historical ties, and informal alliances with lobby groups are no longer sufficient if Morocco still wishes to play a leading role in this geopolitical chess game. Rabat can still come out ahead if it adopts an assertive strategic policy reorientation, even if it has lost the advantage of being the first to make a move.

While the Israel-UAE peace agreement is rightfully seen as a diplomatic coup for the Emiratis, [cementing](#) their growing role in the region, it disappointed many Moroccans and their close allies, who felt Morocco should have been the leader in renewed regional integration efforts.

Rabat has had a close relationship with Jerusalem for decades. They had close defense and security ties as well as a significant level of social openness, with tens of thousands of Israelis visiting Morocco and thousands of Moroccans visiting Israel annually. Moreover, many Israelis have Moroccan roots, and 10 Israeli ministers are of Moroccan descent. Morocco has allowed all its citizens to retain their citizenship, and views Israelis of Moroccan descent as Moroccans.

Diplomatic relations at the liaison office level between Israel and Morocco have been broken off, however, since October 2000.

The Moroccan eclipse is an enigma for strategists and diplomats for these reasons:

- Nearly 10% of the Israeli population is made up of Moroccan immigrants or is of Moroccan origin. Equally noteworthy is the historic presence of a large Jewish community in Morocco, which numbered up to 270,000 on the eve of the kingdom's independence.
- Morocco and pro-Israel Jewish communities have collaborated closely on issues of mutual interest. For example, Morocco has not hesitated to work with pro-Israel NGOs and lobbies in the US to gain the support of the US administration for its autonomy plan for the Sahara and otherwise gain influence in Washington.
- Though Morocco, despite its close historical relationship with the US, has never been at the forefront of American foreign policy priorities, it has been visited by US presidents and high level officials who had a personal affinity for the country. Under the Trump administration, the countries have been cultivating ties on women's issues, education, and humanitarian projects in addition to the traditional areas of counterterrorism, security, and defense collaboration.
- The late king, Hassan II, skillfully used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both to shine on the international scene and to establish Morocco as an essential interlocutor in the Middle East peace process.

Over time, however, international foreign policy deliberations shifted elsewhere. Morocco has tried to disentangle itself from Middle Eastern conflicts in order to focus its diplomacy on a more centered integration into the African Union. But even as Morocco sought ways to leave the Middle East and Arab affairs behind, those issues pursued it, complicating Rabat's objectives.

King Muhammad VI, who ascended to the Moroccan throne in 1999, largely continues in the footsteps of his father toward Israel. However, a change of direction toward Israel is visible. Some observers close to the palace advance the thesis that this shift reflects post-"Arab Spring" fallout from the revolutions in several Arab countries and the coming to power of Islamists in Morocco.

The Justice and Development Party (PJD), which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood and Erdoğan's Turkey, has been leading the Moroccan government as a consequence of the 2011 uprising in Morocco and the subsequent compromise that created a new, inclusive constitution and brought with it a wave of popular support for pro-Brotherhood elements. These developments narrowed Morocco's attention for an extended period. For almost a decade, the majority of town halls in large Moroccan cities were taken over by Islamists who had a dim view of relations with Israel.

While the defense cooperation between Morocco and Israel continued unabated and indeed strengthened behind the scenes, the media were heavily influenced by the disaffection and mild belligerence exhibited by elements of the PJD.

While talk of renewing outreach to Israel and taking a more active role among the Muslim majority states continued, tension over Morocco's role as head of the al-Quds group, pressures from other countries, and its own interest in retaining strong ties to Israel affected its foreign policy interests. As a result, Morocco's Africa policy became somewhat conflicted and unmoored.

While Rabat was busy struggling to clarify its foreign policy direction and messaging, the Emiratis went full-speed ahead toward a diplomatic breakthrough with Israel that paves the way for a concerted regional integration process. The Israel-UAE deal is thus a wake-up call to Morocco's diplomats and intelligence service.

Those two forces, according to intelligence experts, have been preoccupied by [an anti-Moroccan campaign led by Amnesty International](#) and trivial internal concerns. In recent months, moreover, these agencies have been distracted by the coronavirus pandemic, the challenges of an unexpected drought, and other unforeseeable events. On top of all that, 2021 is an election year in Morocco.

The logical consequence of the Moroccan eclipse is its loss of a major diplomatic card that once made Rabat a leader capable of bringing together the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Morocco is now being pushed toward the exit of its last stronghold in the Middle East by its

Arab peers: its presidency of the al-Quds Committee, which is rumored to be at stake.

By withdrawing from the international scene and playing a passive role, Morocco has allowed itself to be subsumed by foreign influences—a natural consequence of attempting to stay neutral and avoid major conflagrations rather than pursuing an affirmative line closest to its own national interests. By fading into the background and refusing to get involved, Morocco has allowed the UAE, and in particular Sheikh Muhammed bin Zayed Nahyan, a fine strategist and visionary, to take the place once occupied by King Hassan II.

As a result, Morocco has ceased to be viewed as a significant player and can no longer influence either peacebuilding with Israel or the various conflicts and tensions pertaining to diplomatic affairs in the Middle East. The continuity of the private flirtation between Rabat and Jerusalem is no longer enough to sustain a relationship that is being challenged by more committed relationship offers from other increasingly influential players. The same goes for the usefulness of the Moroccan intelligence services and lobby groups. If Rabat does not reassess its political priorities, it faces the risk of being left behind to pick up the scraps.

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# Indonesia: A Major Prize in the Battle for the Soul of Islam

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Saudi support for religious ultra-conservatism in Indonesia contradicts Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's promotion of an undefined form of moderate Islam intended to project his kingdom as tolerant, innovative, and forward-looking. It also suggests that Saudi Arabia is willing to work with the Muslim Brotherhood despite its denunciation of the group as a terrorist organization.

Java's mosque landscape resembles a map dotted with flags marking outposts of warring parties.

Mosques with three-tiered tiled roofs reflect traditional Javanese cultural houses of worship. They outnumber the rapidly growing number of Saudi-funded mosques, built by the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS), which sport a little dome rather than tiles as the third tier of the roof.

A plaque on the construction site of a mosque in a village in Central Java tells the story.

The plaque features the Saudi flag as well as the emblem of Vision 2030, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's plan to reform and diversify the kingdom's economy.

The plaque thanks the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) for the funding. WAMY is one of the government-controlled non-governmental organizations the Saudi government has used for almost half a century to fund the global spread of Islamic ultra-conservatism.

The story the plaque tells, however, goes beyond charitable Saudi support for the construction of houses of worship in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

It suggests that Indonesia is in a category of its own in a global rivalry for Muslim religious soft power in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the southeast Asian state are major players.

It also calls into question Prince Muhammad's shift away from religious legitimization and massive global funding of ultra-conservative religious institutions.

Finally, as in the case of Yemen, it casts doubt on the sincerity of the Saudi government's labeling of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

It shines a spotlight on religious soft power competition between the kingdom and the UAE and the two countries' different approaches to harnessing faith in a bid to define what it stands for and how it is utilized to project the state as tolerant, pluralistic, and forward-looking.

To be sure, Prince Muhammad, since rising to power in 2015, has significantly curbed almost half a century of Saudi funding of ultra-conservative mosques, cultural and educational institutions, scholarships, and media across the globe that had been implemented in an effort to cement the kingdom's leadership of the Muslim world and counter Iranian revolutionary ideology.

The Crown Prince has also nurtured a sense of nationalism as a pillar of Saudi identity, curtailing the power of the kingdom's religious establishment and religion as a major legitimizer of the rule of the Al-Saud family.

Indonesia, however, is the exception that confirms the rule.

Welcomed by tens of thousands lining the streets of Jakarta, King Salman made the importance of religious investment in Indonesia clear on a visit to Indonesia in 2017, the first by a Saudi monarch in almost half a century, as part of an Asian tour that also took him to Malaysia, Japan, and China.

The monarch disappointed Indonesian leaders with the degree to which he was willing to invest in the country's economy but was more generous when it came to [spending on religious soft power](#).



[Media reports](#) suggested that the kingdom committed to building five mosques for the military and three new satellite campuses of the Saudi-funded Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies (LIPIA) in Indonesian provinces.

Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesia's official language, is virtually nonexistent on the grounds of LIPIA, a bastion of Saudi ultra-conservatism in the Indonesian capital affiliated with the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. LIPIA is dedicated to the teaching of Arabic.

LIPIA's more than 3,000 students study tuition-free in gender-segregated classes. The institute frowns upon [elements of social life](#) that are denounced as forbidden innovations by Muslim ultra-conservatives, including music, television, and fun.

Driving Saudi proselytization interests in Indonesia is far more than the kingdom's longstanding support for religious ultra-conservatism.

As in the case of Iran, it aims to counter a challenge, this time not from a militant rival but from an institution that threatens to bypass the kingdom as well as the UAE as a result of its moderation.

The renewed Saudi drive came two years after Indonesian President Joko Widodo first endorsed a concept of humanitarian Islam that propagates tolerance and pluralism and endorses the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights put forward by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), widely viewed as the world's largest Muslim movement. Nahdlatul Ulama was founded almost a century ago in opposition to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's strand of Islamic ultra-conservatism.

Widodo (also known as Jokowi) chose Ma'ruf Amin, a leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, as vice president for his second term.

Speaking three years after his initial endorsement at the laying of the ground stone of the [International Islamic University \(UIII\)](#) in West Java, Widodo threw down a gauntlet by declaring that it was "natural and fitting that Indonesia should become the (authoritative) reference for the progress of Islamic civilization."

Widodo saw the university as providing an alternative to the Islamic University of Medina, which has played a key role in Saudi Arabia's religious soft power campaign, and Al Azhar, the citadel of Islamic learning in Cairo, which is influenced by financially backed Saudi scholars and scholarship as well as Emirati funding.

The university is “a promising step to introduce Indonesia as the global epicenter for ‘moderate’ Islam’,” said [Islamic philosophy scholar Amin Abdullah](#).

Saudi and Emirati concerns were initially assuaged when Widodo's aspirations were thwarted by critics within his administration.

A six-page proposal to enhance Indonesian religious soft power globally put forward by Nahdlatul Ulama at the request of Pratikno, Widodo's minister responsible for providing administrative support for his initiatives, was buried after the foreign ministry warned that its adoption would damage relations with the Gulf states, according to the author of the paper.

That could have been the end of the story.

But neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE anticipated Nahdlatul Ulama's determination to push its concept of humanitarian Islam globally, including at the highest levels of government in western capitals as well as in countries like India.

Nor did they anticipate Widodo's willingness to play both ends against the middle by supporting Nahdlatul Ulama's campaign while engaging on religious issues with both the Saudis and the Emiratis.

Nahdlatul Ulama's success in accessing European leaders as well as the Trump administration left the Saudis and the Emiratis with two choices: co-opt or be seen to engage.

While the UAE opted to co-opt with [pledges of massive economic investment and religious cooperation](#), Saudi Arabia, pressured by influential figures in the West, put up a botched effort to be seen as engaging.

In an unprecedented move, [Muhammad Issa](#), the secretary general of the Muslim World League (MWL), a prime Saudi vehicle for the global projection of religious ultra-conservatism that Prince Muhammad converted into a tool for the promotion of his concept of moderate Islam, visited the headquarters of Nahdlatul Ulama in February in Jakarta.

It was the first visit to one of the world's foremost Islamic organizations in the League's almost 60-year history. Although active on social media about their various engagements, neither the League nor Issa referred on platforms like Twitter to their meeting with Nahdlatul Ulama.

Issa had turned down an opportunity to meet two years earlier when a leading Nahdlatul Ulama cleric and he were both in Mecca at the same time.

Issa had told a Western interlocutor who was attempting to arrange a meeting that he had “never heard” of the Indonesian scholar and could not make time “due to an extremely busy previous schedule of meetings with International Islamic personalities” that included “moderate influential figures from Palestine, Iraq, Tunisia, Russia, and Kazakhstan.”

Saudi Arabia was forced several months later in the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian presidential election to replace its ambassador in Jakarta, [Osama bin Muhammad Abdullah Shuaib](#). The ambassador had denounced in a tweet—which has since been deleted—Ansor, the Nahdlatul Ulama young adults organization, as heretical, and he had supported an anti-government demonstration.

During his February visit, Issa signaled his intentions by taking with him to the group's headquarters Hidayat Nur Wahid, a leader of the Indonesian PKS, the Muslim Brotherhood aligned-political party and a staunch rival of the National Awakening Party (or PKB), which is closely associated with Nahdlatul Ulama.

Wahid is also a Muslim World League supreme council member and on the advisory board of the Saudi-funded King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna.

However, Widodo's office barred Wahid from attending Issa's meeting with the president.

Tellingly, pleading commitments in Indonesia, Wahid had bowed out of a groundbreaking visit to Auschwitz by 25 prominent Muslim leaders headed by Issa weeks before the Muslim World League chief traveled to Indonesia, according to sources familiar with the arrangements for the visit.

Critics suggested that Wahid, who had criticized an earlier visit to Jerusalem by a Nahdlatul Ulama leader at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee, would have been going out on a limb by joining the delegation to Auschwitz.

"This is the Saudis playing a double game," said a leader of the Nahdlatul Ulama.

PKS's links to the Muslim Brotherhood and its apparent reluctance to buy into Saudi Arabia's and the Muslim World League's agenda of a nominally tolerant and pluralistic Islam that engages with powerful Jewish communities as well as Israel has not prevented the kingdom from ensuring that the party benefits from its financial largesse.

Back in Javanese villages, PKS's building of mosques with Saudi money is paying off.

Contrary to Javanese tradition, the mosque in the central Javanese village was named after the Saudi benefactor who funded the construction through the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. "We don't name mosques after human beings," complained a Nahdlatul Ulama villager.

A Palestinian flag fluttered suddenly from the roof of the village's pickup truck hub from where farmers transport their produce to market, with few residents recognizing what it represented.

Rather than taking the flag down, Nahdlatul Ulema changed the tenor of its religious education and events in the village, reverting back to the nationalistic and militaristic themes of Banser, the five-million-member militia of Ansor, its young adults wing. It potentially set the stage for a confrontation if the PKS continued its agitation.

The 2019 elections were nonetheless proof of PKS's Saudi-backed success.

The party won more than 20% of the vote in a village in which historically one could count votes on the fingers of one hand.

“The war songs and events attended by Banser members in uniform are sending a message. It’s a message that is being heard by the other side. Banser was always strong in our area but now people are lining up,” said a prominent Nahdlatul Ulama member in the village.

He suggested that the parties were keeping the peace in the village for now, but that could change if and when Nahdlatul Ulama decides its militia has no choice but to step in. It would not be the first time the militia has successfully confronted more militant hard-core Islamist groups on the streets of Java.

Warned Indonesian home affairs minister Tito Karnavian: “The real challenge of Indonesia today is the rise of intolerance, intolerant groups, or intolerant ideologies.”

Speaking in a video of a webinar hosted by the [Religious Freedom Institute](#), Karnavian pointed to strands of religion that have “inherent teachings of intolerance such as Salafism. It’s not an Indonesian strand of Islam, of course, being imported... This is happening today in Indonesia... They want to envision the establishment of Indonesia as an Islamic state... Sharia being implemented (would be) the break-up of the country.”

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# Why F-35s Should Not Be Released to the UAE and Saudi Arabia

by Shimon Arad

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The normalization of Israeli-UAE relations will have significant strategic and political ramifications for the Middle East as a whole and Israel in particular. However, Israel's regional standing relies quintessentially on the perception of its technological and military superiority and not on the fluid nature of reversible political agreements. In the Middle East, peace treaties—as the Egyptian and Jordanian examples show—need to be protected through security arrangements that discourage their violation rather than through the provision of military capabilities that may one day, under a change of leadership and intent, encourage a challenge to Israel.

Following the recent [announcement](#) of the agreement to normalize relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a significant hurdle in the path of the release of the F-35 fighter jet to the UAE was removed. After a [classified briefing](#) on the F-35 to the Emirati military, President Trump publicly indicated that he is giving serious consideration to the release of the F-35 to the Gulf State. “They’d like to buy F-35s,” he [stated](#) in a recent news conference. “We’ll see what happens. It’s under review.” At the same time, administration officials are trying to [reassure](#) Israel that the US will ensure its qualitative military edge (QME) under any future arms deals with the UAE.

The sale would undoubtedly be a boost for Trump’s [policy](#) of increasing America’s arms exports. The many billions of dollars that such a deal would be worth could help compensate for the [removal of Turkey from the F-35 program](#) following its purchase of advanced Russian surface-to-air missiles and contribute to the effort of bringing down the [fighter’s per-unit costs](#). At the same time, it would reassure Washington’s regional partners of its continued long-term support and send a message to Iran that the US will defend its Gulf allies. Also, it

signifies Washington's appreciation for the UAE's role in the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century" proposal.

However, the release of the F-35 to the UAE will have significant adverse consequences for Israel that need to be considered.

First, such a decision would represent a significant digression from America's historical commitment to preserving Israel's QME. According to US [legislation](#), guaranteeing Israel's QME means supplying it with military means and capabilities that are above and beyond the weapons systems provided by the US to the Arab countries, regardless of their declared intent toward Israel.

In the volatile Middle East, circumstances and intentions change far more rapidly than capabilities. Examples from the region's recent history include the so-called "Arab Spring" and the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, and the antagonistic Islamist turn of Turkey. The first was a signatory of peace with Israel, and the second was a close partner of Israel in the region. Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan are limited and susceptible to public hostility. Given this innate vulnerability, the US has refrained to date from providing Egypt and Jordan with its most advanced military capabilities, thereby safeguarding Israel's military superiority vis-à-vis its existing peace partners.

Second, the decision to release the F-35 stealth fighter to the UAE would be a precedent that it would be impossible not to extend to other Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia, Washington's leading partner and arms client in the Gulf. The Saudis [want](#) to purchase the F-35, and it would be impossible for the US to release it to Abu Dhabi and not to Riyadh. In consequence, Israel's aerial superiority—an [essential](#) prerequisite for the preservation of its overall QME—will be undermined. Once this threshold is crossed, it will be harder for Washington to deny other highly advanced weapons systems to Egypt, Jordan, or Morocco.

Even if the Gulf version of the F-35 were downgraded, it would still provide game-changing fifth-generation stealth, network-centric, and command and control operational capabilities that would undermine

Israel's [advantages](#). These capabilities include interconnectivity between fifth and fourth generation fighters, making the hundreds of already existing advanced fourth generation fighters in the Gulf and Arab air forces even more lethal. The only aerial capability that could surpass the F-35 is the [F-22](#), but the US has thus far [refused to release](#) that capability to Israel.

Third, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have no real military need for the F-35, and their existing fourth generation F-16s, F-15s, and Eurofighters—with their advanced radar, avionics, air-to-air missiles, and air-to-ground munitions—are more than a match for Iran's outdated air force. The US presence in the Gulf provides additional deterrence were the Iranians to launch a large-scale strike. The [attack](#) last September on Saudi Arabia's strategic eastern oil processing facilities by Iran illustrates the Gulf States' need for improved defensive capabilities rather than for the means to carry out surprise stealth attacks. Also, providing the Gulf States with the F-35 could embolden them to act against Iran and possibly draw the US and Israel into the fallout. According to this line of thinking, the US has been careful not to provide Taiwan with offensive capabilities that could embolden it against China and only recently [agreed](#) to sell it F-16V fighters.

Fourth, agreeing to release the F-35 to the Gulf States might inadvertently increase the Iranian threat against those states by triggering Iranian offensive actions in the years before the fighter jet actually reaches its destinations. This development could raise the potential for US entanglement at a time when it is seeking to reduce its regional footprint, not add to it. Additionally, such an announcement—against the backdrop of the [failure](#) to extend the arms embargo against Iran—would boost the efforts of China and Russia to supply Tehran with their versions of advanced aerial platforms.

### ***Historical precedents***

The history of advanced weapons sales to the Gulf and Arab countries—both before and after the 2008 QME legislation—shows that if a US administration is adamant and willing to lean hard on Congress, it will eventually succeed in approving such deals. Previous



attempts by Israel and pro-Israel lobbies to prevent weapons sales to Arab countries succeeded in delaying or mitigating them, but not in preventing them altogether.

In 1978, for example, the US agreed to sell Saudi Arabia 60 F-15 fighters. To overcome the expected staunch Israeli and Congressional opposition, the Carter administration promised that the sale would not include external fuel pods and bomb racks to reduce their offensive capability against Israel. Congress approved the deal in large part because of this assurance. Two years later, however, following the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, the Carter administration went back on this assurance, but had to delay a decision on the expansion of the F-15 package to Riyadh because of the upcoming presidential election.

After his inauguration, President Ronald Reagan decided to approve the sale of fuel pods and bomb racks as well as modern Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. Given the strong opposition from Israel and Congress, Reagan temporarily delayed the sale. Still, in April 1981, he not only revived the extended F-15 package but added five AWACS patrol planes, seven KC-135 refueling tankers, ground radar stations, and additional sophisticated equipment. Though faced with fierce opposition, Reagan succeeded in persuading enough senators to win approval for the package in October 1981.

In 2010, the Obama administration decided to sell 154 advanced F-15s to Saudi Arabia. Again, Israel was unable to prevent the sale but managed to offset it through the release of the F-35. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates refers to this qualitative offset in his [memoirs](#), writing that among the steps taken “to ensure that Israel’s QME was not diminished by the F-15 sale to Saudi Arabia... we would sell Israel the same model F-35 Joint Strike Fighter we were going to provide our NATO allies.” In part, Israel’s position vis-à-vis the Obama administration was strengthened because of the QME legislation, which necessitated that the administration affirm that Israel’s QME would not be undermined by the proposed sale.

The above examples illustrate the main avenues of influence with which Israel can try and block or influence the sale of the F-35 to the Gulf

States. The primary avenue is engagement with the administration. Israel needs to strenuously object to any sale of F-35s to the region but allow the administration to present its plans to maintain Israel's QME if such a deal is to be approved. Given Israel's standing among President Trump's Evangelical supporters, Jerusalem may be in a position to request that such discussions be put off until after the US presidential election in November.

Secondly, Israel needs to engage with Congress actively on this issue. The more support Israel garners in Congress, the stronger its hand will be vis-à-vis the administration. Again, while [Congress has never successfully blocked](#) a proposed major arms sale, it has affected the timing and composition of such sales. By expressing strong opposition, it has dissuaded presidents from formally proposing certain arms sales.

However, in a standoff between the president and Congress, the former has the advantage, unless a two-thirds majority in both houses can be mobilized to override a presidential veto and prevent a sale. The recent use by the Trump administration of [emergency authorities](#) to bypass congressional opposition to selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan demonstrates the advantage a determined administration has over Congress. However, given the sharp criticism this step drew, it may be politically difficult for the administration to repeat this maneuver in the case of the F-35s.

Even after taking into account the strategic and political advantages of the Israel-UAE agreement, the Israeli defense establishment continues to resoundingly [oppose](#) the release of the F-35 to the Gulf and Arab states. Whether Washington will heed this objection in its policy deliberations and subsequent Congressional discussions remains to be seen.

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# The Strategic Benefits to the US and Israel of Offering F-35s to the UAE

by Dr. Amin Tarzi

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The official normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rare victory for the United States' overall political and military strategy in the Middle East and has significant global implications. Should Israel elect to accept a measure of risk by supporting the sale of F-35 fighters to the UAE, both parties could see immediate as well as longer-term benefits.

For Israel, the new opening with Arab countries in the Persian Gulf offers unparalleled political, strategic, and financial opportunities. With the UAE case as a model, Israel has the opportunity not only to showcase its technological knowhow in safeguarding Gulf states from threats posed by Iran and other potential adversaries, but also to extend its own defensive measures further from its borders and closer to its most ardent adversary. Beyond security sector collaborations, numerous other Israeli firms—from desalinization plants to those producing safe nuclear energy—stand to expand their markets and accrue benefits, not only in economic terms but also in terms of public perception.

The UAE's bold move to formally normalize its relationship with Israel came with considerable risk. The calculations in Abu Dhabi hinged on security factors from threats emanating from Iran, the perceived unreliability of the US commitment to long-term security arrangements in the region, and the confrontational stances taken by Muslim Brotherhood-inspired governments in Qatar, Turkey, and Libya. The normalization process between Israel and the UAE, while ongoing for years, was formalized with the mediation of the US. That factor was part of Abu Dhabi's risk-benefit calculation: by smoothing relations with Israel, it is trying to further solidify its relationship with Washington.

Cooperation between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem on shared threats could have been enhanced without overt normalization, but a US-mediated opening of normalized relations suggested several key benefits that made it worthwhile to the UAE. The most immediate of these potential benefits is the sale to the Emirates of F-35s.

This issue has prompted much debate, mainly in Israel, revolving around the American commitment to maintain Jerusalem's qualitative military edge (QME) as mandated by Congress in 2008. That commitment assured Israel that it would continue to possess technological and other advantages that would enable it to deter larger enemy forces.

[Those in Israel who oppose](#) the sale of F-35s to the UAE point to the instability of the political order in the Middle East as reason enough to fear the sale's ultimate result. Others opposing the sale argue that should the UAE obtain the advanced stealth fighters, the US would find it very difficult to avoid selling them to Saudi Arabia as well, which would further erode Israel's QME in the region.

Both arguments have merit. However, Abu Dhabi took the step of normalizing relations with Jerusalem to safeguard its political system from both internal and external threats. If the first act of post-normalization is an Israeli campaign to persuade Congress or the Trump administration to rescind the F-35 sale to the UAE, trust in the budding relationship between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem, as well as between Abu Dhabi and Washington, will be damaged.

Unlike the peoples of Israel's neighbors Egypt and Jordan, with whom Jerusalem has had chilly peace agreements for many years, the people of the Emirates seem to be embracing their government's decision. The UAE government and its people now regard both Israel and the US as trusted partners. Building alliances based on trust and dependability would provide Israel with much greater defensive depth and would afford the US a chance to deny further access to Russia and China in the region—all while maintaining a lighter American footstep there.

As for the Saudis, as leaders of the Muslim world, they have thus far made the resolution of the Palestinian issue a prerequisite to normalization of relations with Israel. With ample reports of covert

collaboration between Israel and Saudi Arabia, what message would it send to Riyadh should Jerusalem pressure Washington to withdraw the F35s from the table?

It is important to keep in mind that Israel's QME is not hinged on [aircraft only](#). Israel, through its relationship with the US and on its own, has qualitative tactical military advantages over its potential adversaries, and these should be maintained. The overall strategy would be to change existing and potential enmities to acceptance, if not full normalization of relations, between Israel and states in the region. To achieve that, some minor risks will have to be taken by all parties involved.

Moreover, if the US does not offer F-35s to the UAE or potentially to Saudi Arabia, both US adversarial peer competitors and European allies can be expected to step in. Not only would they reap the economic and political advantages of such deals, but also, in the case of China and Russia, they would weaken both the US and Israel.

*Dr. Amin Tarzi is Director of Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the U.S. Marine Corps or any other U.S. governmental agency. Any references to this piece should include the foregoing statement.*

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