



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Arab Reactions to the New Israeli Government

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,093, July 11, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Arab states and their leaders do not treat Israel as they treat other countries. This includes even simple greetings on the occasion of a new government's being installed. The main reason is the sympathy the Palestinian issue enjoys on the street in those nations, though the leaders themselves largely despise the Palestinians. The ascent of a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated politician to the ruling coalition in Israel attracted much more interest in the Arab press than the ascent of Naftali Bennett to the PM position.

It is no surprise that Arab leaders can be very touchy on the subject of Israel. Consider, for example, the recent visit of the new UAE ambassador to Israel, Muhammad Mahmoud Khaja, to Rabbi Shalom HaCohen. The [blessing](#) given by the rabbi to the ambassador made headlines around the world, but the Arabic press called it the "scandal of the century."

Arab leaders treat the subject of Israel with kid gloves. They are never in a hurry to issue statements for fear of provoking public outrage or demonstrations that might jeopardize their rule. This is the primary reason why almost no Arab leader made a public reference to the ascent of Naftali Bennett to the premiership in Israel. His appointment was met with a resounding silence in the Arab world, from kings and presidents to foreign ministers.

The one [exception](#) was Bahrain. If any other messages were sent, they were issued privately and were not published in the Arab press. This would be consistent, as Arab leaders often prefer that any letters or greetings to senior Israeli officials for holidays or other events be kept from public view.

It is no wonder that it is the Mossad, not the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that is responsible for managing relations between Israel and the Arab states. From the very first contacts with Morocco, Bahrain, and the UAE all the way to the establishment of full diplomatic relations, the Mossad handled the entire affair.

This is not to say the Arab press ignored the change of power in Israel. But most of the coverage of the event focused not on Bennett's ascent but on Netanyahu's downfall, as well as on the raucous Knesset session at which Bennett delivered his first speech as PM amid heckling by Likud lawmakers.

The thing that was of greatest interest to the Arab media was not, in fact, the change of PM, but rather the entry into the ruling coalition of the Israeli-Arab Islamic political party Ra'am, which represents the Muslim Brotherhood. This resonated across Arab social networks and was widely reported in the media, especially in the Arab Gulf monarchies.

Of these states, Qatar and Kuwait support the Muslim Brotherhood; Oman sits on the fence, while Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have designated the Muslim Brotherhood—including Hamas, its Palestinian offshoot—as a terrorist organization.

Many journalists, especially Saudis and Emiratis, have wondered how Israel can possibly consider the Ra'am party, with its Muslim Brotherhood connections, a legitimate political partner at a time when Hamas is widely defined around the world, including by Israel and most of its Arab peace partners, as a terrorist group. That being the case, how can Ra'am be kosher?

Saudi cartoonist Fahd Jubairi strongly criticized the entry of Ra'am into the coalition. Muhammad Shaikh, a famous Saudi journalist, also lashed out: "Why is the Muslim Brotherhood accusing the Emirates and Bahrain of treason over normalization with Israel, while the [Muslim Brotherhood-aligned] Ra'am movement is entering into the [Israeli government] coalition!?"

Another Saudi journalist, Muhammad Sa'ad, wrote a scathing article entitled "How Hamas Killed Sheikh Jarrah" in which he accused the terror organization of starting a pointless war that resulted in the worsening of the Palestinians' image in international eyes due to Hamas's use of rockets against innocent Israeli civilians.

Saudi journalist Baina Mulhim published an article in *Ar-Riyadh*, the most popular newspaper in Saudi Arabia, under the headline "The Zionist Brotherhood." The piece harshly criticized the Muslim Brotherhood and the contradictions in its ideology, as well as its "trading" in the Palestinian issue

for its own interests. Mulhim wondered how one Muslim Brotherhood offshoot could attack Israel while another joins its government.

The change in PM in Israel did not cause much buzz in the Arab media. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood, via Ra'am, will now have a hand in governing Israel drew far more attention, and not of the positive sort. That the Gulf States were muted in their criticism of Israel during the last Gaza war indicates that they support Israel in its conflict with Hamas, even if they can't say so publicly.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published in Israel Today on June 16, 2021.

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